

What Catholics Should Know About Solidarity

by Mary J. Giblin



A small group of students from my university spent most of a semester in Ghana, in west Africa. What a great experience for these young Americans! Each took courses, worked in various local institutions, caring for children or the disabled, and lived with a Ghanaian family.

The students came back with many new insights—among them a new understanding of family and a new consciousness of the central importance of human relationships in life. They have doubts now about an overemphasis on material success in American culture. They also have a new sense of themselves as world citizens, as Americans who want their nation to deal fairly and compassionately with Africans. They went to Ghana with a sense of compassion; they returned with a sense of solidarity.

This *Update* will help you to understand why both of these—compassion and solidarity—are good and necessary. We'll then show why the Church—indeed the gospel—challenges each of us to grow our compassion

into solidarity.

Compassion and solidarity

In the days just after Hurricane Katrina made landfall on the Gulf Coast late summer, 2005, one of the first images was of an African-American man with a young boy. The man recounted how he was holding on to his wife in the flooding. His wife told him that he should take care of the children because he wouldn't be able to hold on to her. Then she was swept away. The man was beside himself with grief and distress.

At such moments, the human response is compassion. Compassion is a movement of the heart to respond to one who is suffering. As the word itself expresses it is a "feeling" (*passion*) "with" (*com*) the other person, a spontaneous desire to help and to let the one suffering know that she/he is not alone. Compassion is a deeply human reaction that acknowledges, on the one hand, our shared vulnerability to suffering and, on the other, the need for human support to bear suffering.

Each reader can no doubt think of many examples of the experience of compassion: coming to the aid of a person in an emergency, reaching out to a distraught friend, visiting with a severely ill relative. We want to say, by word and deed, "I understand; I care. You are not alone in this ordeal." The initial outpouring of help to Hurricane Katrina survivors by communities, churches, schools and many other organizations shows that compassion can also be a community experience. We see the suffering and we realize that it could have been our community, we sense how devastated we would be, and we want to help.

Such responses are very human and very Christian. It is the response of the Good Samaritan in Jesus' parable. In Vatican II, the bishops chose to begin their document on *The Church in the Modern World* with a description of the Church community that reflects the same kind of response:

"The joys and hopes, the grief and anguish of the people of our time, especially of those who are poor or afflicted, are the joys and hopes, the grief and anguish of the followers of Christ as well....That is why they cherish a feeling of deep solidarity with the human race and its history" (*The Church in the Modern World*, #1).

Solidarity includes compassion, but it is more. Solidarity is not only a spontaneous movement of the heart that responds immediately, but also a decision to take action to join with, to form community with, those who are suffering. Solidarity takes place when a person or community not only sees a need and acts, but commits to follow up, to endeavor to see that action is taken to improve the other's situation for the long run.

Solidarity also includes a kind of mutuality that goes both ways in respect and accountability when the relationship grows. Solidarity becomes a two-way process because it becomes a relationship with both sides giving and receiving. Those who reach out to offer help quickly begin to realize that their own humanity is being fostered in new ways. Those who are receiving assistance discover that they bring gifts to the relationship which the others would be otherwise lacking.

John Paul II's challenge

The late Pope John Paul II's encyclical *On Social Concern (Sollicitudo Rei Socialis)* developed the theme of solidarity. The pope urged that the Christian response to increasing interdependence in the world should be the moral and social attitude, the virtue, of solidarity:

"This then is not a feeling of vague compassion or shallow distress at the misfortunes of so many people, both near and far. On the contrary, it is 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" (#38).

John Paul II asked Catholics to look behind the poverty present in the world to see the moral evil that is too often causing it: the decisions of human beings inspired by "real forms of idolatry." He was especially concerned with the "all-consuming desire for profit" and "the thirst for power, with the intention of imposing one's will upon others." It is "the concrete acts of individuals who introduce these [unjust] structures, consolidate them and make them difficult to remove" (#36-37).

The late pope called these unjust structures "structures of violence" that bring suffering and death to the poor. Among these "structures of violence" are stringent enforcement of payment of international debt by the poorest countries, the arms trade, and the financial power of multinational institutions both private (corporations) and public (the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank, the World Trade organization) when that power is abused.

To respond to these structures, John Paul II called for "a commitment to the good of one's neighbor with the readiness, in the gospel sense, to 'lose oneself' for the sake of the other instead of exploiting him, and to 'serve him' instead of oppressing him for one's own advantage" (#38). The pope urged that solidarity be built on national and international levels as well as on the individual level (#40).

In his last years, John Paul became acutely aware of the process of globalization—the pervasive and unprecedented growth of telecommunications and of economic and financial connections between and among nations. John Paul II saw the new hopes for communication among the world's peoples that globalization brings, but he was also aware of its many dangers, especially that of increasing inequalities among rich and poor. The late pope emphasized the need to look for the common good and especially to the condition of the poor in the midst of these rapid changes. "The challenge," he said, "is to ensure a globalization in solidarity, a globalization without marginalization" (1998 Peace Message). The poor and underprivileged are not to be pushed to the margins, or outskirts, of society.

The difficulty of solidarity

A crucial aspect of solidarity is that it means being in relationship with others. Feeling sorry for or wanting to be charitable to people can lead you to solidarity, but it is only the beginning. Solidarity is very different from the "top-down" ideas of paternalism or maternalism. Those distort the human dignity of others by treating them as children and assuming someone else understands their difficulties and knows the solutions more than the people themselves. Solidarity does not assume understanding or solutions. It begins with careful listening and taking to heart what is heard.

But listening may be difficult, for two reasons. One reason is that being present or listening to stories of oppression and impoverishment can be deeply disturbing to the listener who may then want to rush to conclusions about “what to do.” Solidarity is at least partly about offering human companionship and support while the person or the community itself figures out what to do, what would work for forward movement. This can take time and patience. American “efficiency” and desire to produce results may be counterproductive if the struggling group has not really come to their own decision on a solution. The people in poverty may get overwhelmed and drawn into the “solution” of outsiders, which may or may not be right for the situation.

A second reason listening can be hard may ring true for many *Update* readers: They may be saying that some of their problems result from U.S. power in the world. Americans like to think favorably of their country and its business enterprises. Surely many great things have come from our national spirit. But Americans may find it difficult to think of their country’s corporations as exploiting the natural resources of another country without adequate regard for the health and safety of the people who live in the midst of those resources. We may find it challenging to hear honest reports of American companies, whose products we consume, exploiting the labor of young women with sweatshop wages and without regard for human rights.

In the same way, most Americans think the United States is wonderfully generous via foreign aid to the poor of the world. But the truth is a bit more complex than that. Our aid is often tied up with military objectives. As large as our contributions are, they are a very small portion of our overall wealth—proportionally smaller than many European countries.

The first task of solidarity is the willingness to be educated even when the information makes one uncomfortable. The second challenging task is to find ways to do something about the knowledge one gains.

This is a question of morally guided imagination, which Church members have. In one diocese, for example, after several years of education and trips by parish members and leaders to Central America, church members decided to sell “Fair Trade Coffee” (that pays farmers better prices) in the churches and to lobby the grocery stores to carry it on their shelves.

This may be a small step, but one with impact on people’s lives. Another diocese assisted in a local community effort to raise awareness about child labor and sweatshop abuses. An ecumenical prayer service was held and parish members distributed pamphlets in shopping areas. These types of efforts are happening in dioceses across the United States, but they are only a start.

Parish engagement

Ultimately, solidarity is about mutual respect, the development of friendship between persons and communities, and learning about the realities of each other’s lives. The Catholic bishops of the United States have been very supportive of these concerns of solidarity. In 1997 the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops published *Called to Global Solidarity: International Challenges for U.S. Parishes*. The bishops used a number of scriptural reflections to ground their approach to solidarity.

They began with Cain’s question, “Am I my brother’s keeper?” (Gn 4:9) to stress our responsibility for the fate of the world’s poor—not only those close at hand, but also those in far-off places. We are one human family, they reflected, with each human being bearing the image of God. We are called to care for all of human life and for all creation (a new insight into solidarity with creation).

The bishops refer to Jesus’ command (a Jewish mandate) to “love your neighbor as yourself” as having global implications in our interdependent world. Our participation in the body of Christ calls us to action for “the least among us” without regard for boundaries or borders.

More than a decade ago, the statement on global solidarity endorsed the efforts of those parishes that have established international ties. The statement referred to parishes that have developed “twinning” relationships (partnerships) with parishes in Central and South America and in other parts of the world. The bishops urged all parishes to make global solidarity an integral part of parish ministry and pastoral priorities.

The bishops said this solidarity should be expressed in prayer and preaching, in stewardship, in the formation of children, and in how the members invest their resources, make choices at work and in the public arena. In other

words, the bishops were asking parish communities and individual Christians to seek out ways to act for global solidarity.

A 2001 statement focusing on Africa turned out to be ill-timed. The U.S. bishops' statement "A Call to Solidarity with Africa," passed with little notice as the attention of the Church and nation were so focused on the terrorist attacks of September 11.

The underlying theology of the 2001 statement follows that of the global solidarity document—seeing through Jesus the dignity of each human being and the common destiny of the entire human family. But the bishops were motivated by hope and concern and a sense of urgency.

The statement lifts up the hope of the continent in its vibrant peoples and growing churches. It examines the challenges of Africa to United States policies in regard to African poverty, debt, development, education, health care, trade, peacemaking and refugees. While there has been some movement in the cancellation of debt for about 14 African countries, the urgency of these issues has only increased since 2001.

Solidarity, hospitality and gratitude

We need not always think of overseas peoples and cultures when we think of solidarity—indeed, one could rightly say that solidarity begins at home. One way to live out the virtue of solidarity in many parishes is through a ministry of hospitality to refugees, immigrants, migrants and the displaced in our own land (for example, Katrina survivors).

The wider world of the poor is already present in most dioceses, and there are numerous opportunities for the practice of solidarity. In many cities, especially, there are pockets of refugees and immigrants who are seeking a spiritual home. How open are our parishes to them? Some parishes may have begun to have a Mass in Spanish. But are the newcomers really welcomed to the parish?

Possibly there are African refugees in the community who are unacknowledged. One way for a parish to respond is to have listening forums where people can tell their stories and educate parishioners to the difficulties faced in their home countries and the challenges of adjustment to American culture. These new neighbors have much to give to the church community and have a need of psychological and other kinds of support—simple things like being taught to drive or tutored in English.

When we hear of the extreme hardships of others, our response is often to give thanks to God for the lives that we have. But we also know that gratitude to God, this God "who hears the cry of the poor," can best be demonstrated by solidarity with others—reaching out to help and learn and build community among us all. Each community and each individual can find creative ways to be in solidarity with others—using one's own special gifts, talents and opportunities.

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