

Solidarity–Beyond the Clichés

A Theological Perspective

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The term 'solidarity' is in danger of developing into a cliché. It has been employed so often as a kind of 'compassion football' between a guilt-ridden (for some) oppressor 'First' World and an indignant (for some) oppressed 'Third' that its significance has become opaque. That lack of precision undermines its value for clarifying the relevant Christian response to the divisions between North and South, powerful and powerless, in our world. Solidarity shows us a way which eschews both a patronising attitude and a sense of guilt on the part of the North, and a feeling of being alone in the struggle on the part of the South. Solidarity empowers both and leads to a deeper understanding of what Jon Sobrino, recalling St Paul's injunction, calls 'bearing with one another in faith'.

In this article I wish to explore the theological roots of solidarity in an attempt to recapture the flavour of its deeper meaning in a belief that solidarity is a key concept for those who 'hunger and thirst for what is right' (Mt 5:6). I follow Albert Nolan's argument that its roots are found in the Old Testament, but that it broadens its scope when Jesus begins his mission. The new theology of neighbour then becomes the model of solidarity for later thinkers, theologians and activists ('*militantes*' to the Latin Americans) in both the Third World and the West, in their struggle to live an authentically human, and therefore authentically Christian life. Lying at the core of solidarity is co-responsibility for the planet, and the humanisation of life for every being on it, by ridding the world of the structures of widespread injustice and deep-seated division which disfigure the created oneness of humanity. The solidarity model is more relevant and realistic for 'aid and development' non-governmental organisations of a Christian orientation, than the model of so-called 'partnership'. Solidarity is the way forward for Christians who wish to witness to their faith as liberating and transformative action in the world, as the heralds of real 'Good News' to the poor and God's justice to humanity.

Solidarity in the Old Testament

The notion of solidarity with the poor, given fullest expression in Christ's life and teaching, is firmly rooted in the Old Testament. Moses, brought up in privilege and freedom at Pharaoh's court, opens his eyes voluntarily to the plight of his own Hebrew people, even killing an Egyptian guard and then accepting exile and poverty as a shepherd, in a show of solidarity with the

oppressed. The Bible created by Latin American Base Ecclesial Communities has the following exegetical note to chapter 2 of Exodus: 'He (Moses) deliberately did not close his eyes like those who deny their humble beginnings or do not enter into solidarity with their comrades ('o dejar de solidarizar con sus compañeros') in order to be admitted into better surroundings or in order to be well thought of by their bosses' (*my translation*).²

When the people abandon Moses by threatening to kill him and by building the Golden Calf, he keeps his solidarity with their plight, linking his fate to theirs, even to the extent of coming into conflict with both the greatest worldly power of his day and the divine power of Yahweh. Moses pleads for the second time with Yahweh on the people's behalf, 'I am grieved. This people has committed a grave sin, making themselves a god of gold. And yet, if it pleased you to forgive this sin of theirs...! But if not, then blot me out from the book that you have written.' As Pixley and Boff state, 'Moses identified with his people moulded by their sufferings to the extent that he preferred to give his life rather than allow Yahweh to abandon them in the desert'.³

Moses displays some of the characteristics of the kind of solidarity perfected in Christ. These include the identification with the oppressed, the voluntary renunciation of privilege and riches to serve the poor, the immersion of self in the struggles and realities of the poor, the life-long commitment to the cause of the poor, while not remaining blind to their faults, and even the offering of one's life to the liberation of the oppressed. Yet Moses was a child of his age. He was caught in the aspic of the culture of his day which viewed solidarity mostly in terms of loyalty to kinsfolk, to the family and to the nation, but not to humanity at large. It is this Hebrew notion of 'collectivity' which Jesus then expands to include all of humankind.

Transition to New Testament Solidarity

J.D.M. Derrett has shown that, after money and prestige, the main concern of society during Jesus' time was group solidarity, the holding together of the bonds of the family, kinship, nation as well as those of profession or religious sect.⁴ It was an exclusive, clique-ridden society and woe betide the person who did not belong to one of the cliques. Moses and the 'sons of Israel' sing: 'So great your (Yahweh's) splendour, you crush your foes; you unleash your fury, and it devours them like stubble' (Ex. 15:7) and, later in the same song, 'On them (*the people of Philistia, Edom, Moab and Canaan*) fall terror and dread; through the power of your arm they are as still as stone as your people pass..' (Ex. 15:16).

According to Nolan, in the Old Testament, to love your neighbour as yourself is to experience group solidarity.⁵ The 'neighbour' 'referred to in the following passage from Leviticus is to be equated with 'own people', 'brother', 'children of your people', in other words, 'kinsman',

someone belonging to that particular and therefore exclusive group: 'You must not slander your own people...you must not bear hatred for your brother in your heart... nor must you bear a grudge against the children of your people...you must love your neighbour as yourself.' (Lv. 19: 16—18). This argument is borne out in the 'Biblia Latinoamerica', where it says of the use of the term 'neighbour' in this passage: 'Here, the neighbour designates brother of the same race' ('*Aquí el projimo designa al hermano de la misma raza*').⁶ Even Gutierrez, who does not go as far as Nolan in differentiating between the idea of 'neighbour' in the Old and New Testaments, acknowledges that the neighbour is 'essentially a member of the Jewish community', but that references to people outside the race 'indicate an effort to transcend these limitations'.⁷

This introduces two important aspects to the Hebrew notion of solidarity, (a) solidarity with an exclusive group implies enmity towards people placed outside that group and (b) only members of the group are viewed as fully human. To love Yahweh in the Old Testament meant to exercise justice, especially to the poor and oppressed, but whether that extended beyond the race was fudged. The solidarity expressed in Jesus' mission was uncompromising. God's love was for the whole of humankind, even those regarded as enemies, and solidarity with the neighbour meant with every created being.

Solidarity in the New Testament

The 'poor' of Jesus' time went beyond the purely economically poor such as beggars, widows and orphans to include other categories. The 'sinners' were not just prostitutes and tax collectors, those with 'shameful' professions, but those who had so little education that they could not follow the complex religious laws and purifying rituals of the day. They were the rabble who knows nothing about the Law' (Jn 7:49). The sick constituted another category, people who were regarded as having been struck down by God because of their or their ancestors' sins.

The point of unity of all these categories of 'poor' is that they were all victims of an injustice imposed on them by other human beings. The economically poor were reliant on the charity of others and despised for it. Their dignity and humanity were diminished. The social outcasts, the 'sinners', were regarded as immoral and looked down upon by their fellow citizens. The sick were shunned through no fault of their own. As Nolan observes, 'It was a dark and fearful world in which the helpless individual was threatened from all sides by hostile spirits and equally hostile men'.⁸ The humanity of the 'poor' was reduced to the point where they no longer counted as human beings. In Enrique Dussel's words, 'instead of two "someones", we have one "someone" in confrontation with "things"; we have "reification".' ⁹ If Jesus displays solidarity to the 'nobodies' of this world, the "discarded people" ¹⁰ people with nothing to recommend them except the fact of their having been created through God's love, then that

solidarity must obviously extend to the whole of humanity, even one's enemies: 'Do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who treat you badly' (Lk 6: 27–28).

The rule of God, which Jesus comes to proclaim, is based first and foremost on an all-inclusive solidarity of the human race, because humankind is not only made in the image and likeness of God but, in Gutierrez's phrase, 'he [sic] is also the sacrament of God'.¹¹ Everyone is to be loved and respected in virtue of their being human—not because they are family (even the relationship between Jesus and his mother is defined in terms of how it contributes to the fulfillment of God's will in Lk 11:27–28) or because of kinship (as Jesus' actions with the Roman centurion etc. illustrate). Jesus replaces the centre stage previously taken by sacred laws, the Torah and tradition (as in Mark 2:27, 'The sabbath was made for man, not man for the sabbath..') with the human person. It is therefore made manifest that 'God's temple is human history; the "sacred" transcends the narrow limits of the places of worship. We find the Lord in our encounters with men [sic], especially the poor, marginated and exploited ones. An act of love towards them is an act of love towards God'.¹²

Elements of Jesus' Solidarity

Jesus' solidarity has broken through the division between 'neighbour' and 'non-neighbour', but it is still a solidarity which takes the side of the poor and oppressed against that of the rich and oppressor, not because Jesus sees poverty as a 'virtue, but because poverty is the result of unjust relationships between human beings, provoking the intervention of the messianic king'.¹³ Justice between human beings should reflect God's justice which lies in hearing the cry of the oppressed and then joining with them in efforts to liberate them. The poor, reliant totally on God, are more open to him and therefore more open to one another. Justice, therefore, lies at the heart of the Jesus' option for the poor .

A further element of Jesus' solidarity is the necessity of having compassion. This is, according to Nolan,¹⁴ an inadequate translation of the Greek verb 'splagchnizomai' deriving from a noun meaning entrails, bowels, heart. What Jesus felt was not a vague sympathy with the poor, but an emotion which welled up from the depths of his very being. 'And when the Lord saw her, he had compassion on her, and said unto her, Weep not' (Lk 7:13). The Authorized Version retains something of the flavour: 'But whoso hath this world's good, and seeth his brother have need, and shutteth up his *bowels of compassion* from him, how dwelleth the love of God in him?' (1 Jn 3:17). A deep-seated feeling of this kind of empathy, often resulting in anger at how human beings have perverted God's justice, is a necessary part of Jesus' solidarity.

The last element I would point to is the 're-humanisation' of the poor person through Jesus' solidarity. As illustrated above, the poor and oppressed were regarded in Jesus' day as non-persons. Then, as now, they

had little control over the structures which made them poor in the first place, and little power to change them. They were not, in Freirean terminology, the subjects of their own history but the objects of someone else's—the oppressor's. Jesus restored their humanity, not by making them the *objects* of his love, as is often the case with 'good works', but by making them the *subject* of God's love. How we relate to the poor becomes the standard by which we shall all be judged (Mt 25: 40–41). Pixley and Boff state: 'Their battered faces (*those of the poor*), in which the image of God can no longer be recognised, reveal an objective situation that is deeply offensive to God'.¹⁵ By liberating them from whatever oppresses them, Jesus restores their createdness in the image of God to them. Secure in the knowledge that they are at the centre of God's concern and love, they become transformed and liberated human beings. Liberation from oppression and becoming the subject of one's own history become, then, essential elements in this new theology of neighbour.

Contemporary Christian Solidarity

Solidarity has perhaps become a buzz word in contemporary justice and peace circles in an unwitting way, but it remains 'a primal call to the human dimension within any person and a challenge based on the fact that each of us is socially a part of all humankind.'¹⁶ Sobrino elaborates on his thesis to indicate how persecution of the church in his adopted homeland of El Salvador, including the murder of priests, nuns and lay people as well as Archbishop Oscar Romero, led Western Christians into solidarity with that church. This further revealed the extent and nature of the poverty and oppression of the majority of El Salvador's population. That 'ethical indignation', to borrow Boff's phrase,¹⁷ led to an ethical demand which in turn triggered off a concrete action manifesting itself in forms varying from supporting liberative projects in El Salvador financially, to martyrdom in support of the people's struggle.

However it manifests itself, solidarity has to be rooted in the reality of the lives of the poor. The Latin American bishops, meeting at their Second General Conference at Medellin in 1968, stressed that solidarity had to be made concrete. 'This solidarity', they stated, 'means that we make ours their problems and their struggles...This has to be concretised in criticism of injustice and oppression...'.¹⁸ They then list a number of practical proposals to lift their option for the poor from the realm of theory to practice.

Freire argues that it is only when the oppressor stops seeing the oppressed as an amorphous mass and starts to see them as exploited persons and 'risks an act of love' that true solidarity is found.¹⁹ As Professor Forrester notes: 'It is impossible to be alongside some abstract, idealised poor person isolated from context'.²⁰ That presents a radical challenge to the Church in the West, since, as Reinhold Niebuhr so trenchantly observes, 'Those who benefit from social injustice are naturally less capable of understanding its real character than those who suffer from it',²¹ it is difficult

for Western Christians to acknowledge their role as oppressor. Once that is achieved, the second step is to realise how that role dehumanises not just the person at the sharp end of oppression, but the oppressor wielding the stick.

Self-conscientisation through exposure to the reality of the poor leads to the realisation that a fundamental change of heart, *metanoia*, is required. It is clear that fulfilment as a human being means giving oneself more and more to others, the *persona est esse ad alium* ('being a person means being for others') of Duns Scotus. 'Losing oneself in others', said Cardinal Paulo Evaristo Arns, the Cardinal Archbishop of Sao Paulo in Brazil, while visiting Scotland, 'means living fully with empathy, discovering, even in the most degraded person, a point of beauty, a safe place to throw the anchor of solidarity'.²²

It is at this stage that the experience becomes salvific for the erstwhile oppressor. By aiding the poor person to become the subject of his/her own history, people in solidarity discover a renewed meaning for their life and recover a sense of their own worth and value as human beings. 'For', Sobrino writes, 'the poor are "others" and when they (*the rich*) take on solidarity with them they undergo the experience of being sent to others only to find their own truth'.²³ In other words, the person from the West in solidarity with the poor is led to a discovery of what it is to be human, different from the increasingly affluent norm offered by his/her society. Pope John Paul II, whose deliberations on solidarity pre-date his Pontificate, has called this a lack of success in "being" because 'through a reversal of the hierarchy of values, they (*the rich*) are hindered by the cult of "having"'.²⁴

The imbalance in power relationships begins to melt away as it is realised that solidarity with the poor means taking up their cause, not ours. 'Real solidarity', Nolan insists, 'begins when it is no longer a matter of "we" and "they"'.²⁵ This illustrates the mutuality and co-responsibility of solidarity. It is not another name for philanthropy from the rich to the poor or the idealisation of a romantic, ascetic ideal from the poor to the rich, but a genuine sharing in their human gifts which ultimately leads to mutual empowerment to tackle the sinful structures of our world. That mutuality unmask the individualism found in many Western Christians whose faith since the Enlightenment has become increasingly confined to the private realm, and less concerned with the structures of society and concomitant matters of justice. Metz attributes this to the rupture of the unity between religion and society, resulting in a 'practice of faith reduced to the timeless decision of the person'.²⁶ It no longer expresses, especially for the affluent, a primary need. By touching the faith of the poor, the original public proclamation of the Christian message can be recaptured, revivifying a sagging faith and leading to the rediscovery of the 'dangerous memory' (Metz 1980, p. 89) of Jesus Christ.²⁷

For Western Christians nowadays that solidarity is often concretised through support for aid and development agencies, some of them church-inspired. In such circles, the current expression for showing concern for the poor from a non-patronising standpoint is 'partnership', which would

indicate a level of equality of power which does not exist. On the other hand, as has been shown, 'solidarity' implies a fundamental shifting in power relationships from the rich to the poor and the humanisation of every being on the principles outlined above. The stress is on our co-responsibility to one another and our world; on a bias towards the oppressed neighbour; and on a recognition of the 'other', overcoming self and egoism to commit oneself to the transformation of, not just the symptoms of social injustice but, above all, the causes.

Solidarity is centred on following Christ who 'in assuming human nature ... has united to himself all humanity in a supernatural solidarity which makes of it one single family'.²⁷ It manifests itself not in a 'vague feeling or shallow distress at the misfortunes of so many people' but a 'firm and persevering determination to commit oneself to the common good', to conquer the 'structures of sin', to be ready 'in the Gospel sense to "lose oneself" for the sake of the other instead of exploiting him [sic], and to "serve him" instead of oppressing him for one's own advantage'.²⁸ It becomes a 'counter-alliance that is expressed in the partisanship of the imitation of Christ'.²⁹ In short, it is, in Jon Sobrino's less prosaic words, 'another name for the kind of love that moves feet, hands, hearts, material goods, assistance and sacrifice toward the pain, danger, misfortune, disaster, repression or death of other persons or a whole people...The aim is to share with them and help them rise up, become free, claim justice, rebuild'.³⁰ That seems a fitting manifesto for any Christian agency which realises that solidarity necessitates that the 'road to the Kingdom of God, which passes through the strength of the weak, has to be followed by understanding the need to live in a common struggle'.³¹

(Unless otherwise stated, all Biblical references are taken from the Jerusalem Bible.)

- 1 Jon Sobrino and Juan Hernandez Pico, *Theology of Christian Solidarity* (New York, 1985) p. 1 ff.
- 2 *La Biblia Latinoamerica* (Madrid, 1972) p. 90.
- 3 Jorge Pixley and Clodovis Boff, *The Bible the Church and the Poor* (London, 1989) pp 74–75.
- 4 J. D. M. Derrett, *Jesus' Audience* (London, 1973) pp. 39, 52.
- 5 Albert Nolan, O.P., (London, 1982) p. 61.
- 6 *La Biblia Latinoamerica*, p 142.
- 7 Gustavo Gutierrez, *A Theology of Liberation* (London, 1974) p. 196.
- 8 Nolan, *Jesus Before Christianity*. p. 26.
- 9 Enrique Dussel, *Ethics and Community* (London, 1988) p. 18.
- 10 Nolan, *Jesus Before Christianity*. p 65.
- 11 Gutierrez, *A Theology of Liberation*. p. 295.
- 12 Gutierrez, *A Theology of Liberation*. p. 201.
- 13 Leonardo Boff, *Jesus Christ Liberator*, (London, 1990) p. 285.
- 14 Nolan, *Jesus Before Christianity* p. 28.
- 15 Pixley and Boff, *The Bible, the Church and the Poor*, p. 112.
- 16 Sobrino and Pico, *Theology of Christian Solidarity*, p. 8.
- 17 Leonardo Boff, *Jesus Christ Liberator*, p 269.
- 18 ed., Alfred T Hennelly, *Liberation Theology: a Documentary History* (New York, 1990) pp 116–117.

- 19 Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (London, 1980) p 26.
- 20 Duncan B Forrester, *Theology and Politics*, (Oxford, 1988) p. 65.
- 21 Quoted in Karen Lebaocz, *Justice in an Unjust World* (Minneapolis, 1987) p. 61.
- 22 Paulo Evaristo, Cardinal Ams, *Wider Horizons of Solidarity* Address at Scottish Catholic International Aid Fund, Glasgow, 1990.
- 23 Sobrino and Pico, *Theology of Christian Solidarity*, p 11.
- 24 Pope John Paul II, *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis* (Rome, 1988) § 28.
- 25 Albert Nolan O. P., *The Service of the Poor and Spiritual Growth* (London, CIIR, 1985) p. 5.
- 26 Johann Baptist Metz, *Theology of the World* (London, 1969) p 109.
- 27 Apostolicam Actuositatem (The Decree on the Apostolate of Lay People) *Vatican Council II : The Conciliar and Post Conciliar Documents* ed., Austin Flannery O. P. (Dublin, 1975) p. 775.
- 28 *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis*, § 38.
- 29 Metz, *Faith in History and Society*. p. 231.
- 30 Sobrino and Pico, *Theology of Christian Solidarity* p. vii.
- 31 Pixley and Boff, *The Bible, the Church and the Poor*, p. 70.

Leaves

Ian Caws

Leaves, jammed in the heating system, crackle
 Quickly in the draught, fragile as my prayers.
 They will be powder soon. An old fan roars
 At me, eager for warmth, and leaves wriggle
 A cobweb on the grill but can't cajole
 It into opening. I know this is
 A heat that hunts me to the end, that dries,
 Never comforts the leaves and me at all.

Time was, I could mount any particle
 And ride it to the centre. That was when
 I was not lost in these ducts. Natural
 Air buoyed the green leaves and the words were mine
 Yet were not. See now, my prayers, wafer frail
 My desire heady, heady as the wine.