

THE VALUE OF SOLIDARITY

"Today there is a tendency to claim ever broader individual – I am tempted to say individualistic – rights. ... Unless the rights of each individual are harmoniously ordered to the greater good, those rights will end up being considered limitless and consequently will become a source of conflicts and violence".

The New Testament describes one fruit of the Holy Spirit (cf. *Gal 5:22*) as *agathosyne*; the Greek word expresses attachment to the good, pursuit of the good. ... This is an attitude that "wills the good" of others; it bespeaks a yearning for goodness, an inclination towards all that is fine and excellent, a desire to fill the lives of others with what is beautiful, sublime and edifying.

Solidarity finds concrete expression in service, which can take a variety of forms in an effort to care for others. And service in great part means "caring for vulnerability, for the vulnerable members of our families, our society, our people". In offering such service, individuals learn to "set aside their own wishes and desires, their pursuit of power, before the concrete gaze of those who are most vulnerable... Service always looks to their faces, touches their flesh, senses their closeness and even, in some cases, 'suffers' that closeness and tries to help them. Service is never ideological, for we do not serve ideas, we serve people".

Solidarity is a word that is not always well received; in certain situations, it has become a dirty word, a word that dare not be said. Solidarity means much more than engaging in sporadic acts of generosity. It means thinking and acting in terms of community. It means that the lives of all are prior to the appropriation of goods by a few. It also means combatting the structural causes of poverty, inequality, the lack of work, land and housing, the denial of social and labour rights. It means confronting the destructive effects of the empire of money... Solidarity, understood in its most profound meaning, is a way of making history, and this is what popular movements are doing". (*Pope Francis: Fratelli Tutti, paras 111, 112, 115, 116*)

Some might immediately recall that the word "Solidarity" took on a special significance during the time of Pope St John Paul II. It was the name given to the movement in Poland which eventually brought about that country's release from communism. This was a movement that the Pope supported and encouraged. The context of the word in Pope Francis' Encyclical is a more interior and embracing one. Here he uses it in a scriptural sense of working together for the common good as a gift of the Holy Spirit to the whole community. More broadly it means an attitude of 'caring service' to others.

In these days there seems to be a conflict of almost rampant individualism (determined to fashion society's values) and the community more generally. I think the Holy Father is giving us a timely warning that we need to be alert to the fact that specific interest groups are intent on creating a society that adopts their specific values. Now it may well be that many of these groups are genuine in trying to address identified injustices. But it also true that many of these 'movements' have a deeper agenda to reshape society on values that are contrary to Gospel values. Pope Francis reminds us that our true value has its origins in God and that all that we do, if it is to be authentic, must be directed to helping each of us live and develop according to the dignity of children of God. That is the "greater good" we are committed to and only that can resolve the conflict between individuals. This is the context in which he asks us to reflect on the notion of 'rights'.

One way of bringing a better understanding of "solidarity" is to be prepared to stand together with all in community and to serve each other with a genuine intention to ensure that we do all we can to ensure that the dignity of each one is honoured. This calls for a genuine service that builds the community by our attitude of commitment to the dignity of each one in what we think, say and, by our real life, actions that take the initiative to 'caring' for each other where 'they are at' (as the saying goes). Of course this means continuing the many things we already do to assist those in genuine need or who are marginalised but it goes beyond that. It is more than a superficial benevolence – important though that is – to a genuine 'desire to fill the lives of others with what is beautiful, sublime and edifying.'

In his World Day of Peace Message this year (2021) the Holy Father, drawing in part from the teachings of Pope Saint John Paul II, had written: "Solidarity concretely expresses our love for others, not as a vague sentiment but as 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." Solidarity helps us to regard others – whether as individuals or, more broadly, as peoples or nations – as more than mere statistics, or as a means to be used and then discarded once no longer useful, but as our neighbours, companions on our journey, called like ourselves to partake of the banquet of life to which all are equally invited by God." (*Pope Francis: World Day of Peace Message 2021*)

Reflection.

1. When I become aware of the activities of 'interest (or 'action ') groups' do I make a distinction between their public behaviour and the underlying values or concerns that provoke them?
2. How prepared am I to 'set aside my own wishes and desires' to stand alongside or to become involved in the lives of others who are vulnerable or in need?
3. Can I see that 'solidarity' should be expressed more as a constant attitude rather than a label I might give to affirm my actions to try to make things better for others?

Prayer for Solidarity

Almighty and ever-living God,
empower your one human family to join hands
on our journey of faith.
Send us your spirit of hope,
so that we may work
to alleviate human suffering
and foster charity and justice
in our world.
Amen.