



Pursuing the Common Good: How Solidarity and Subsidiarity Can Work Together



Plenary Session 2-6 May 2008 – In the social teaching of the Church, *solidarity* and *subsidiarity* are viewed as linked, mutually reinforcing and necessary to realising the *common good*. Ideally, this is the case. Indeed, it being the case is what makes for a robust civil society – one serving the common good and respecting the dignity of each and every person. However, the relationship between *solidarity* and *subsidiarity* is more complex than implied above. Moreover, circumstances have changed so radically that by the third millennium the desired relationship between *solidarity* and *subsidiarity* is badly out of alignment. Therefore, what we have to examine during the 2008 Plenary Meeting are the possibilities for aligning these two features of society in a newly transformed social context in which the common good has become more and more problematic.

(a) Firstly, the relationship between *solidarity* and *subsidiarity* can never be taken for granted because their relations are not symmetrical. It is possible for *solidarity* to be high and for *subsidiarity* to be low. This was the case during early Modernity. Throughout Europe the *solidarity* of the Working Class *community* was at its peak. Yet, early capitalism was precisely where Market control was at its (unrestrained) highest and commodification reduced the value of working people to the wage form. Certainly, a thrust towards *subsidiarity* developed in the attempt to found Trade Unions, but it was deflected into wage bargaining and away from control over the work process, working conditions, and work relations, let alone production and productivity. In short, Unions were incorporated into market relations and into the government of the liberal state.

(b) Equally, *subsidiarity* cannot work without *solidarity*. If such a combination is tried, then the organs of *subsidiarity* distance themselves still further from *solidarity*. These agencies are either commandeered from below, by parties claiming to speak for their 'community', and/or they are invaded from above, by the commanding powers of the state bureaucracy. For example, the relative autonomy of the Academy in Europe has seen both autonomy and collegiality reduced by the imposition of government performance indicators and accountability. Subsidiarity has been forfeited largely because there has been insufficient solidarity between academics to defend it.

(c) The conjunction between these two social forms – *solidarity* and *subsidiarity* – and thus their contribution to achieving the common good is therefore contingent and not axiomatic. This is the case despite their mutual reinforcement *when* they do happen to co-exist. Moreover, it also seems indubitable that much contemporary social change militates against their co-existence. Specifically, what has changed that makes the conjunction between *solidarity* and *subsidiarity* ever more problematic?

(d) There is a diminishing supply of community-based *solidarity*, of shared values and, thus, of social cement. Everywhere, a variety of changes undermine the stable, geo-local and face-to-face community. Certainly, *elective* communities (and virtual communities and imagined communities) are on the increase, but without making any significant contribution to the overall *social solidarity* necessary to sustain *subsidiarity*, since, at best, it remains extremely restricted in kind (e.g. football and FIFA).

(e) Conversely, the invasion of everyday life by market forces (advertising, easy credit facilities and money as the sole currency) and by bureaucratic regulations (national and trans-national) jointly accentuate increased materialism within an enlarged iron cage of bureaucracy.

Can this infelicitous cycle be broken? Here we have to consider the role of reciprocity. *Reciprocity* comes in to its own as a 'starting mechanism'. In so doing, it solves a problem encountered in studies of participation in voluntary associations. It is regularly found that membership of them increases trust, of fellow members and in general, and trust is the common denominator of *solidarity*. Yet, where does the impetus come from to develop voluntary associations in the first place?

The role of *reciprocity* as a 'starter motor' has long been recognised. Cicero wrote that 'There is no duty more indispensable than that of returning a kindness', and added that 'all men distrust one forgetful of a benefit'. However, *homo reciprocus* has often been and often is subject to a one sided accentuation (actually a distortion) of his contributions and their consequences. For example, Marcel Mauss saw reciprocal gifts as underwriting exchange relationships and, thus, inexorably leading to the Market and its ahuman principles. Conversely, Alvin Gouldner viewed *reciprocity* as a generalised social norm, stabilised by a 'mutuality of gratifications' (a '*do ut des*' relationship) and socially stabilising in its turn. However, such 'mutuality' was always at the mercy of force which, in turn, undermined *reciprocity* and replaced it by relations of coercion. Note, that neither view can sustain an active view of *justice* (law working for the common good), for in the two cases Law would serve respectively to reinforce market relations and power relations.

Reciprocity is linked to free-giving. *Reciprocity* can only be the key link between *solidarity* and *subsidiarity* provided that it retains its own linkage to free-giving – based upon affect, concern and involvement in the lives and well-being of others. There appears to be sufficient impetus towards free-giving in our populations (for example, organ donors or blood donors) that fuels *reciprocity* as a process that is independent of legal injunctions or reinforcement and expansionary rather than degenerative. Crucially, for our times, the free-giving, without search for material benefit or control, evidenced on the Internet – a neutral medium, also exploited for both other purposes – is a practical exemplification of (virtual) *solidarity* and effective *subsidiarity* that works *because of reciprocity* and could not work without it.

It is *reciprocity* that also results in an upward spiral, which reinforces *solidarity* because more and more of the human person, rather than just their labour power and intellectual skills is invested in such agencies as voluntary associations – rendering their contributions ones that cannot be commodified or commandeered (e.g. dedicated child care, care of the aged, or living in an eco-friendly manner). It is an upward spiral because: (a) there is a development of mutual obligations and practices of mutual support; (b) there is an extension of 'friendship' (in the Aristotelian sense); (c) there is tendency for social identity increasingly to be invested in such associations.

Hence, the seeming paradox of the third millennium that *Gemeinschaft* can develop from *Gesellschaft* – as the solution to the problem Modernity could never solve – 'the problem of solidarity'.

Justice should promote the common good. *Subsidiarity* requires both legal protection and mechanisms for just correction. Otherwise and regardless of being buttressed by internal *solidarity* it can be taken over by other forms of control and guiding principles or fragment through the crystallisation of sectional interests. Thus, on the one hand, there is a need for protection by a form of justice differentiated for different spheres of society, according to criteria appropriate to them. Most obviously, the 'Third Sector' requires protection from incursions from the state, beyond those measures ensuring probity in the conduct of their affairs.

On the other hand, *subsidiarity* entails allocation, but of itself neither the 'Third Sector' nor classical definitions of justice give sufficient guidance about what is due to each social subject or human group. Without the articulation of such a theory, grievances can accumulate and hierarchies with distinct material interests become differentiated, such that no common good can really be achieved.

That's why this Plenary Meeting will give serious attention to 'practical exemplars' of *solidarity* and *subsidiarity* in action, to prevent this from being an arid, though necessary, academic exercise. Between the theory and the practice, what we will effectively be examining are the building blocks of a new civil society able to reach new frontiers in the advancement of the common good. The following topics will be illustrated: new forms of solidary and subsidiary economy; educational initiatives in developing countries; state-family relationships; access to information goods (internet); micro-credit and the third sector.

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