

PURSUING THE COMMON GOOD: HOW SOLIDARITY AND SUBSIDIARITY CAN WORK TOGETHER

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1. In the *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church* (paragraphs 160-163) we read that the principles of *the dignity of the human person, the common good, subsidiarity* and *solidarity* are the permanent principles of the Church's social doctrine. They constitute the very heart of Catholic social teaching.

‘These principles, the expression of the whole truth about man known by reason and faith, are born of “the encounter of the Gospel message and of its demands summarized in the supreme commandment of love of God and neighbour in justice with the problems emanating from the life of society”. In the course of history and with the light of the Spirit, the Church has wisely reflected within her own tradition of faith and has been able to provide an ever more accurate foundation and shape to these principles, progressively explaining them in the attempt to respond coherently to the demands of the times and to the continuous developments of social life. *These are principles of a general and fundamental character, since they concern the reality of society in its entirety: from close and immediate relationships to those mediated by politics, economics and law; from relationships among communities and groups to relations between peoples and nations. Because of their permanence in time and their universality of meaning, the Church presents them as the primary and fundamental parameters of reference for interpreting and evaluating social phenomena, which is the necessary source for working out the criteria for the discernment and orientation of social interactions in every area.* (160 & 161)

2. On the other hand, as we observe social phenomena in contemporary societies, we see that these principles are largely misunderstood. Quite often they are interpreted in ways which are very far from the meaning and intentions proper to the social doctrine. As a matter of fact, reductionist and

biased interpretations prevail almost everywhere. For instance: the common good is identified with material goods, like water, a healthy environment, or similar things; solidarity is identified with feelings of love, or philanthropy, or public charity; subsidiarity is defined as leaving decisions to the lower levels of the political system (see art. 3/B of the EU Maastricht Treaty). These misinterpretations lead to serious consequences. Take, for example, the case of the family: the common good of the family is identified with its assets, family *solidarity* with sentiments of love, *subsidiarity* with leaving each actor to define the family as he/she likes. At the macro level of the national state, *solidarity* is defined in terms of political control over resources, the pursuit of equal opportunities, redistribution via the welfare state (*lab* side); and *subsidiarity* is identified with devolution or privatization (*lib* side). These examples are only a few of the general misunderstandings surrounding key concepts – the common good, solidarity and subsidiarity.

3. The 2008 Plenary Meeting is based upon taking the present situation as a challenge to the social doctrine, which is requested to reflect anew on how society can achieve a configuration that is able to implement its principles. We must look for a proper vision of a truly human society by taking into consideration the cultural, social, economic and political changes of our times in the light of the Christian perspective.

In sum, the aims of this Plenary can be synthesised in three points:

(i) first, it is necessary to examine in depth the current uses of these concepts in order to clarify their correct meaning; such a clarification should be undertaken with reference both to the historical aspects of the concepts and to the way they are put into practice today;

(ii) second, it is particularly important to try to look at social reality and see if there are both theoretical developments and practical exemplars of the correct use of these principles, showing how subsidiarity and solidarity can work together in order to produce the common good in an effective way;

(iii) third, if the two above aims are achieved, we can expect that new ideas and practical orientations will be put at our disposal in order to think of a new configuration of society, one that leaves behind the Hobbesian and Hegelian heritages which still impinge upon contemporary societies and impede the sound working of the four basic principles of the social doctrine.

4. In seeking to accomplish these aims, special attention will be given to the issue of the interdependence among the four principles, and how they can and should work together.

As the *Compendium of the Social Doctrine* reminds us (paragraphs 162-163); *'The principles of the Church's social doctrine must be appreciated in their unity, interrelatedness and articulation.* This requirement is rooted in the meaning that the Church herself attributes to her social doctrine, as a unified doctrinal corpus that interprets modern social realities in a systematic manner. Examining each of these principles individually must not lead to using them only in part or in an erroneous manner, which would be the case if they were to be invoked in a disjointed and unconnected way with respect to each of the others. A deep theoretical understanding and the actual application of even just one of these social principles clearly shows the reciprocity, complementarities and interconnectedness that is part of their structure. These fundamental principles of the Church's social doctrine, moreover, represent much more than a permanent legacy of reflection, which is also an essential part of the Christian message, since they indicate the paths possible for building a good, authentic and renewed social life. *The principles of the social doctrine, in their entirety, constitute that primary articulation of the truth of society by which every conscience is challenged and invited to interact with every other conscience in truth, in responsibility shared fully with all people and also regarding all people.* In fact, man cannot avoid the *question of freedom and of the meaning of life in society,* since society is a reality that is neither external nor foreign to his being. *These principles have a profoundly moral significance because they refer to the ultimate and organizational foundations of life in society.* To understand them completely it is necessary to act in accordance with them, following the path of development that they indicate for a life worthy of man. The ethical requirement inherent in these pre-eminent social principles concerns both the personal behaviour of individuals – in that they are the first and indispensable responsible subjects of social life at every level – and at the same time institutions represented by laws, customary norms and civil constructs, because of their capacity to influence and condition the choices of many people over a long period of time. In fact, these principles remind us that the origins of a society existing in history are found in the interconnectedness of the freedoms of all the persons who interact within it, contributing by means of their choices either to build it up or to impoverish it'.

5. 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, it is necessary to acknowledge that 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, *elec-*

tive 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.

6. To do so, it is necessary to be able to point to some process whose workings amplify *solidarity* and *subsidiarity* simultaneously, thus enabling the common good to be augmented. We find the key linking the two in the concept and practice of *reciprocity*.

Reciprocity comes into 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 inhuman 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.

Some notions, seemingly cognate to or substituting for *reciprocity*, actually break away in the same two directions – towards market relations or towards power relations. Thus, the economic and political theory of 'social

capital' tends to assume that even the most *Gemeinschaft*-like groups are based upon 'interest', whose advancement (or defence) involves exchanges with other forms of capital and thus entails a commodification of persons which is antithetic to *solidarity* and *subsidiarity* alike. Conversely, Communitarianism, as its liberal critics suggest, seeks to combine the virtues of fraternity with the vices of intolerance.

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 a 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'.

7. 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.

8. 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 (the internet); micro-credit and the third sector.