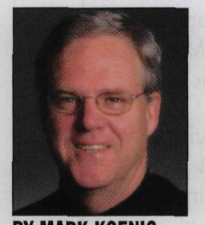
Thirsting for Solidarity

THE ELIMINATION OF POVERTY BEGINS IN KNOWING THE POOR AS OUR BROTHERS AND SISTERS



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Jolt is a highly caffeinated, sugar-laden soft drink promoted as "America's Most Powerful Cola." It is the preferred drink of students, disc jockeys, clubbers, musicians, physicians, nurses, entertainers, truckers—just about anyone who lives the night life.

I wish I could bottle and sell a drink called *Solidarity.* It too would awaken and energize people, but not with caffeine and sugar. No, the Solidarity drink would fill people with sufficient knowledge and spirituality to satisfy their spiritual thirst through the dark night that surrounds us—a night of poverty, injustice, and human suffering.

The Solidarity drink would give its consumers energy to go to uncomfortable places and begin to know those who live or suffer there as people with dignity. The Solidarity drink would allow its drinkers to see those living on the margins of society as part of their human family. Solidarity would energize us not only to give from what we have but also to make the systemic changes necessary for the poor to live life fully. The effects of this drink would not lead us to believe we should do things *for* the poor; rather, it would inspire us to work *with* the poor as co-participants in addressing needs and creating solutions.

The secret ingredient in my drink would be no secret at all: Solidarity would contain Spirit. Because, after all, solidarity is not just about social action. It is sacred work that brings us closer to where God can be found in our midst.

The soft drink analogy will serve as both preamble and moral for the story I will tell in this article: about how I became what might be called a *merchant of solidarity.*

I experienced my own psychological jolt late one night while walking down a Skid Row street in Seattle with some college buddies. I happened to spot a soda can on the sidewalk and stopped to pick it up, only to realize that it still had soda in it. Not sure what to do, I put the can back down. Turning to catch up with my friends, I found a homeless man standing directly in my path.

I started to walk past the man, keeping my eyes down, which led me to notice that his shoes were held together with masking tape. As I watched, he picked up the can and began to drink from it.

Seeing him drink from a can found on the street shocked me. I turned and asked the man if the can was his. He assured me it was not. He seemed gentle and pleasant, so I asked more questions. "Where do you live?" I wanted to know. "On the street," he replied. I asked how he usually got the food he ate. "Whatever people will give me," was his answer. He told me that he was on his way to a local restaurant because its owners threw out their leftover baked potatoes at the end of the night.

I was fascinated by this gentleman of the Skid Row night. He seemed like a good person who was just down on his luck. I tried to negotiate with him, saying that, if he wanted, he could come back to the university with my friends and me. I promised we would make sure he had a warm place to sleep, a hot shower, and something good to eat. He politely said, "No, thanks."

I suggested that we could also help him research job opportunities and help him find something that would cure his homelessness. Again he said, "No, thanks."

I continued to assure him of my wish to help and was surprised when he kept resisting my offers. I was even more surprised when I heard the irritation in his voice as he told me, "If I don't hurry, others will beat me to the potatoes in the dumpster."

FACES WITH NAMES

It was unsettling for me to see someone drink out of a discarded soft drink can; to hear that he ate

food out of dumpsters; and to learn that, although homeless, he would not eagerly accept offers of help—especially from a well-intentioned person like me.

I shared this experience with one of my campus Jesuit friends, who encouraged me to go further along this "journey through darkness." I joined my friend on the weekly visits he made to a coffee house that served the homeless. Over the next several weeks, we made numerous trips to the coffee house. Our purpose was simple: to sit down and have a cup of coffee with the patrons and learn more about them. We did not go to solve their problems; our aim was to get to know people typically described as "the homeless."

I soon learned names and life stories. Many of these people were Native Americans who had left their homes hoping that more opportunities awaited them in the city. Unfortunately, because they lacked education or suffered from alcoholism or other health problems, they eventually found themselves on the street. Some of the people I met, primarily the women, had fled unhealthy or destructive relationships. Many had lost the connection with family that would allow them to return home.

I met intelligent, caring people, and others who were angry and unhappy. I met people with a great outlook on life, and others who had given up hope. I noticed that some of these individuals had great knowledge and admirable leadership skills, whereas others knew little and seemed only to wander. I was saddened by much of what I heard and saw, but I was also surprised to encounter the love and goodness among these people, to see the care they showed for one another, and to learn about their strength and courage while facing illness and addiction.

This was not the first time I had been around poverty. It was, however, the first time that I had gotten to personally know those living *in* poverty. Before experiencing that Seattle coffee house, I saw all poor people as the same and believed that their poverty was the result of personal failings. I also thought of charity as one dimensional, as doing good for others to help them change, not doing so to help the *provider* of the charity transform his or her life as well.

These opportunities to form relationships with people in poverty and to gain an appreciation for their dignity and worth were my first tastes of the solidarity drink.

A Housing Project in Venezuela

I drank more deeply from the cup of solidarity when, with my wife and our three daughters, I served for nine years as a lay "missioner" for the Maryknoll Lay Missioners. Maryknoll Lay Missioners is a Catholic community of lay people (singles, couples, and families) who make three-and-a-half-year renewable commitments to work with poor, oppressed, and marginalized people overseas.*

During our first three years, we were assigned to an ecclesial team in a low-income housing project in Barcelona, Venezuela, living among those we had come to serve. It was a community of 25,000, mostly newly arrived people from rural areas, searching for a life better than the rural poverty they had left.

During our first three years, we lived in a low-income housing project in Venezuela.

However, although the life the housing project offered these people was a better life than that they had known before, it was not a *good* one. There were no schools in our community beyond the sixth grade (most parents had not had opportunities beyond the third grade), and there were no medical clinics or doctors in the immediate area. Nearly 50 percent of the children died before the age of five because of childhood illness, mostly dehydration and gastroenteritis. In a hot, tropical climate, barely one-third of the homes had a way to keep food refrigerated. Selling ice cubes to neighbors was one way for some Barcelona residents to supplement meager incomes. For a full day of hard, manual labor, a worker would be paid the equivalent of the cost of two gallons of milk. Alcoholism and the behaviors associated with that disease, including social and domestic violence, were a huge problem.

My time in Venezuela taught me two more things so important for solidarity: The truth about the evil of poverty, and the importance of fighting that poverty with—not just on behalf of—those you seek to help. Scripture says "blessed are the poor," but the realities of poverty are anything but a blessing. The poverty I witnessed not only caused physical suffering; it also led at times to an even greater tragedy, the destruction of the human spirit. In our housing project, the destruction of the human spirit began at an early age.

I once asked the principal at the local grade school why there were not more schools in the community. Although the housing project's population was sizable, its elementary schools had only enough capacity to meet the needs of a small portion of the children. Just having teachers show up to teach was doing these children a big favor, the principal said, since the Barcelona housing project was a place where few teachers wanted to come. When our daughter was briefly

* For information about the Maryknoll Lay Missioners, see http:// laymissioners.maryknoll.org/.

enrolled in the school, we learned firsthand about overcrowded classrooms that lack textbooks and even water. The fact that some children could learn under these conditions was amazing. But most children succumbed to the message that they were worthless.

Society's message to the adults of the Barcelona housing project was the same as that given to their children. Passing construction projects, I often heard supervisors insult the workers and call them derogatory names. Work was to be performed exactly as the person in charge demanded. For a worker to recommend how something might be done easier or better was to question the authority and knowledge of the person in charge. This was unacceptable, and the person making the suggestion was often berated. In time it became clear to me that, from childhood onward, these people—and probably the vast majority of people living in poverty—had been told by society that they were not valued as persons, that they had no right to dignity.

Our family spent its first full year in Venezuela getting to know the people we had come to serve. Even though we came as members of a pastoral team, we did not build a church building. Even though there was no organized health care, we did not build a medical clinic. Even though there were problems with the schools, streets, and sewers, we did not initiate any development projects.

"The poor of the United States and of the world are your brothers and sisters in Christ," Pope John Paul II told us.

Instead, we slowly built relationships of trust that helped us identify the local leaders and resources with which the needs of the community could be addressed. These needs were jobs, health care, education and other activities for young people, and sewers that did not back up into the streets when it rained. We wanted to make certain that any eventual success or progress enjoyed by the community was based on the participation and leadership of community residents. These individuals were not to be the recipients of charity. They were to be given the opportunity to define what was most needed and how it might happen. That notion of participation is essential to the act of being in solidarity.

John Paul II and the Call to Solidarity

The story of my own thirst to drink from the cup of solidarity highlights some key components of being in solidarity with others:

- Having the ability to move from the world of physical comfort to one that involves being with people struggling to meet their basic human needs
- Experiencing the dignity and worth of those who are suffering or living in poverty
- Working for systemic changes to address human needs
- Having the poor be participants in naming the needs and creating the solutions
- Realizing that this is sacred work

The word "solidarity" is a contemporary word and is often associated with the rights of workers. Within Catholic social teaching it takes on a broader meaning. It involves bringing together those who are "rich," "powerful," or "comfortable" with those who are "poor," "powerless," or "suffering." The use of the word "solidarity" has evolved as the church continues to speak in response to the great disparities that can exist between workers and those who own the means of production. In *Centesimus Annus,* Pope John Paul II encourages us to connect the use of the word with concepts used by his predecessors, such as Pope Leo XIII, who spoke of "friendship" in *Rerum Novarum* (1891); and Pius XI who spoke of "social charity" in *Quadragesimo Anno* (1931).

However, the goal of bringing together people of very different socio-economic levels and creating bonds of solidarity, friendship, or even social charity among them is not easy to accomplish. The book of Sirach, written more than 2,000 years ago, reveals how outlandish the concept can appear: "Can there be peace between the hyena and the dog?/ Or between the rich and the poor can there be peace?/ Lion's prey are the wild asses of the desert;/ so too the poor are feeding grounds for the rich./ A proud man abhors lowliness;/ so does the rich man abhor the poor" (Sir 13:17-19).

The book of Sirach speaks of our natural inclination to live divided lives, to not be in solidarity with the disadvantaged and the dispossessed. Pope John Paul II urged us to surmount that natural inclination and to instead live justly. It was an early and persistent theme of his papacy.

In a homily delivered at Yankee Stadium during his first visit to the United States in 1979, Pope John Paul II used the story of Lazarus as way to encourage us to do more than give only from our surplus. A country as well off as ours should be willing to give even if it meant that some of our own needs would not be met, he said. "The poor of the United States and of the world are your brothers and sisters in Christ," the pope told us. "You must never be content to leave them just the crumbs from the feast. You must take of your

substance, and not just of your abundance, in order to help them."[1]

To sacrifice our own comfort to meet the needs of a family member is a responsibility easy to embrace. It is difficult, however, to understand extending that obligation beyond our immediate family. But that is exactly what the Catholic tradition asks us to do. As Pope John Paul II said in his encyclical celebrating 100 years of social teaching: "Sacred Scripture continually speaks to us of an active commitment to our neighbor and demands of us a shared responsibility for all of humanity. This duty is not limited to one's own family, nation or state, but extends progressively to all . . . so no one can consider himself extraneous or indifferent to the lot of another member of the human family."[2]

Scripture prescribes that we strive against our natural inclination to not be in solidarity. The Torah, the five books of Moses, commands the faithful not to forget about the poor and makes it clear that God measures faithfulness through concern for the widow, the orphan, the foreigner, and other disadvantaged persons living in the community and, by implication, throughout the planet. The Hebrew Scriptures prescribe ways to conduct domestic and business life in order to do right, including how to share the goods of this earth. For example:

> When you reap the harvest in your field and overlook a sheaf there, you shall not go back to get it; let it be for the alien, the orphan or the widow, that the Lord, your God, may bless you in all your undertakings. When you knock down the fruit of your olive trees, you shall not go over the branches a second time; let what remains be for the alien, the orphan and the widow. When you pick your grapes, you shall not go over the vineyard a second time; let what remains be for the alien, the orphan, and the widow. For remember that you were once slaves in Egypt; that is why I command you to observe this rule (Dt 24:19-22).

This passage from Deuteronomy tells us we will be blessed by God for assisting those without home, family, or sustenance. We are called to do so today, as a way of remembering and identifying with the Jews who fled their lives of slavery in Egypt.

In the Gospels, we are told that God will judge our lives according to how well we cared for those in need. In Mathew 25:35, we read: "For I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, a stranger and you welcomed me, naked and you clothed me, ill and you cared for me, in prison and you visited me." The act of caring for outsiders, the poor, the malnourished, the sick, and the incarcerated is equated with caring for our Creator.

Church teaching on solidarity does not end in challenging us to see one another as part of the same family or to care for one another even when it makes us uncomfortable. The teaching on solidarity ultimately calls us to acknowledge *and* address the systemic causes of poverty and suffering. For the people among whom my family lived in Venezuela, it would have made no sense to treat children for dehydration without also addressing the issue of unsafe drinking water. Solidarity obligates us to repair suffering when we have the capacity to effect such a change.

The Torah commmands the faithful not to forget about the poor.

Pope John Paul II also viewed solidarity as an antidote to war and a hope for peace. In his January 1, 2005, message welcoming the 21st century and celebrating the World Day of Peace, he said:

> The very fact that humanity, called to form a single family, is still tragically split in two by poverty—at the beginning of the twenty-first century, more than a billion four hundred million people are living in a situation of dire poverty—means that there is urgent need to reconsider the models which inspire development policies. In this regard, the legitimate requirements of economic efficiency must be better aligned with the requirements of political participation and social justice, without falling back into the ideological mistakes made during the twentieth century. In practice, this means making solidarity an integral part of the network of economic, political and social interdependence which the current process of globalization is tending to consolidate.
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> These processes call for rethinking international cooperation in terms of a new culture of solidarity. When seen as a sowing of peace, cooperation cannot be reduced to aid or assistance, especially if given with an eye to the benefits to be received in return for the resources made available. Rather, it must express a concrete and tangible com-

> mitment to solidarity which makes the poor the agents of their own development and enables the greatest number of people, in their specific economic and political circumstances, to exercise the creativity which is characteristic of the human person and on which the wealth of nations too is dependent.

Applications for Catholic Health Care

How can the concept of solidarity shape the work done by Catholic health care in the United States? I offer a few thoughts based on my own experience and understanding.

Create Opportunities to Know Those Living in Poverty When we make decisions, it is crucial that we ask ourselves, "How will this decision affect the lives of the poor?" However, if we are to do this effectively, we cannot treat the "poor" as anonymous faces or numbers. Health care decision makers must take advantage of any opportunity to meet those living in poverty or suffering on an almost daily basis.

When we make decisions, we should ask ourselves, "How will this affect the lives of the poor?"

Most of our institutions have programs with a specific focus to serve persons in poverty. Taking time to visit those programs and meet some of the clients they serve is a good way to begin keeping the faces of the poor near us. We can also find ways to serve these persons directly through programs in our communities, such as helping to serve meals at a soup kitchen or assisting at a shelter for the homeless. Without establishing some type of personal relationship with those living in poverty, it is very hard to keep their needs and aspirations present in the decisions we make on a daily basis.

Create Programs Based on Participation and Empowerment Quality-improvement programs succeed only when conducted with the participation of those whose work is being surveyed. The same is true for programs serving people in poverty. What steps are taken to include the clients in the design and improvement of these programs? How are the intended clients participating in the identification of needs and the creation of solutions?

Work for Systemic Changes An excellent example of working for system changes is the work performed by the Catholic Health Association and other Catholic organizations to address health care access issues. Living the principle of solidarity in our advocacy work will require greater vulnerability on our part so that others can live with less vulnerability. Solving the problems of health care access will not be accomplished by using only what is left over from surpluses. And, besides access, there are other issues affecting people in poverty that need our attention, such as immigration, just wages, and the environment, all of which have ramifications for people's health.

Commit to Addressing Global Poverty Poverty and solidarity are global issues. We cannot advocate justice at home and ignore the rest of the planet. At the 2005 Catholic Health Assembly, Cardinal Oscar Andrés Rodriguez Maradiaga, SBD, Archbishop of Tegucigalpa, Honduras, called on us to be part of a "globalization of solidarity." Experts have calculated that if each of the industrialized countries were to give just 0.7 percent of its gross domestic product to address the problem, extreme poverty could be eradicated.

As Catholic-sponsored institutions, we must respond to the crisis of global poverty. U.S. Catholic health care organizations should dedicate a fixed percent of our budgets to eradicating extreme global poverty. There are already a number of Catholic health ministry organizations supporting the education of health workers in other countries, supporting employees to provide direct service, and sending needed medical supplies and equipment. The Catholic Consortium for International Health Services is an excellent resource for organizations wishing to learn about best practices for international activities or for exploring opportunities for collaboration (see Sr. Peggy Egan, OSF, PhD, "Health Care and the Global Community," pp. 29-32).

As long as extreme poverty exists in the world, there will be a need for a drink called Solidarity; a drink that awakens us to see clearly the dignity of others and to feel our connectedness as family, a drink that energizes us to work through the darkness of human suffering and poverty—a drink that satisfies our thirst for responding to God's presence on earth. ■

NOTES

1. Pope John Paul II, "Do Not Leave to the Poor the Crumbs of Your Feast," October 2, 1979, reprinted in *The Pope Speaks*, vol. 24, no. 4, 1979, p. 314.
2. Pope John Paul II, Centesimus Annus, 1991, para. 51.
3. Pope John Paul II, "Peace on Earth to Those Whom God Loves," January 1, 2000.