

Spirituality and Solidarity

By Jane M. Deren, Ph.D.

I had the wonderful opportunity, some thirty years ago, to study in Krakow, Poland. I first saw what to me was a haunting icon: a carved figure of Christ sitting with His face in His hand, an incarnational image of a God who experiences human suffering. This was not a unique folk carving. I soon learned that similar images of Christ could be found throughout the Polish countryside, most carved by peasant craftsmen. These images were not placed in churches, but in the fields where the uneducated population toiled for their daily bread and brought their daily sorrows. To these people, Christ was Emmanuel, “the God who is with us.” Christ was with these people every day, not working miracles, but in an essential form of solidarity, an ongoing relationship.

SPIRITUAL SOLIDARITY

This relationship was a mutual one. The Polish peasants were being faithful to the call of Christ in Gethsemane: “Stay here and keep awake with Me.” In this request, Jesus was, and is, asking only that His followers be with Him, be present in a prayerful way. The request is basically a call for solidarity. Christ is asking that the disciples be fully aware and fully with Him in his suffering. “Can’t you stay awake for one hour?” He asked. “Stay awake and pray that you will not be tested. You want to do what is right, but you are weak.” The invitation is not to jump into action, but to be in contemplation, to be with Christ in His suffering, so when the time comes to act, the disciples will do what is right. They will be grounded through an authentic solidarity with Christ.

The folk artists who carved the statues in the Polish fields were not educated people, formally trained in either art or theology. But they understood that Christ calls the faithful to be with Him, and the faithful call on Christ to be with them, to give a deeper meaning to their daily lives. The roughly carved icons of a suffering Christ are visual testaments to solidarity. It is not surprising that the faith-grounded movement that began the dismantling of Eastern European communism was named Solidarity and that it sprang from the same soil as these icons of Christ did. It is also not surprising that our Polish pope, John Paul II, has emphasized the concept of solidarity in his encyclicals, letters and speeches, and that he has demonstrated

solidarity in his travels to be with many opposed and suffering peoples. John Paul II has modeled for us how to be deeply present, to listen intently to others, to be in authentic solidarity in a prayerful way with all those who suffer with Christ.

This kind of spiritual solidarity is what we want to nurture in our students as we prepare them to act in charity and in justice. In his recent book, *The Principle of Mercy: Taking the Crucified People from the Cross* (Orbis Books, September 1995), Father Jon Sobrino, SJ, has declared: “In authentic solidarity, the first effort to give aid commits a person at a deeper level than that of mere giving. It becomes an ongoing process, not a one-time contribution. Moreover, the giving and receiving persons set up relationships. It is not a matter of a one-way flow of aid, but a mutual giving and receiving. This is what solidarity really means.”

MODELS IN AUTHENTIC SOLIDARITY

The importance of being with others in a mutual giving and receiving is obvious as we look at some of the saintly people of the 20th century. Along with Pope John Paul, they model for us how to live out Catholic social teaching. Dorothy Day is one model of “being with.” Not just because she lived on the Lower East Side of New York amid poverty, but because she strove to be fully present in prayer, and in a daily prayerful awareness, to the dignity as well as the pain of those humans living in poverty. She lived in true community with these people, not because she was busy doing things for them constantly, but because her actions were rooted in a faithful prayer life that embraced them in a spiritual way. This allowed her to see the basic human dignity of every person on the breadline and to take the risk of opening herself to a real relationship with them. Day’s spirituality was nurtured by her willingness to receive from them as well as give to them. This kind of solidarity broke down the divisions between “we” and “they” and further developed her sensitivity to the injustices that oppressed the people in her community.

Father Henri Nouwen, the well-known author of *The Wounded Healer* and many other books, left an academic position at a very prestigious university to live with as well as care for severely disabled people. He realized that being with these people in community, being open to them, learning from them as well as helping them, deep-



ened his own spiritual life. While others declared he was wasting his talents, Nouwen believed this experience of solidarity was the culmination of his vocation.

Sister Helen Prejean, whose work with prisoners on death row is chronicled in the book and film *Dead Man Walking*, is another model of solidarity. Her work began with her simply being available to prisoners, being with them in their last days. She did not go into the prisons with an activist agenda. She was there to literally be with prisoners and walk with them. This being with or, as she has described it, “making someone else’s pain our very own” and “bearing with one another in faith,” eventually led her to become an advocate against the injustice of the death penalty. But her advocacy began with simply being present in the prisons, opening herself for a mutual exchange with fellow human beings.

THE PROCESS FOR STUDENTS

In teaching Catholic social thought, we cannot be satisfied to simply mention that solidarity is one of the main elements of this tradition. Catholic social teaching is not merely abstract theory to be grasped intellectually, but a call that we must live out. We must seek ways to have students begin experiencing solidarity and to understand it as an ongoing process. The works of charity and the works of justice must be rooted in a prayerful sense of being with others, an awareness of their dignity and their need, an openness to share their perspectives as well as their pain and suffering. This kind of spiritual solidarity will develop a sense of co-responsibility to one another and to our world, and lead to a social analysis that will help our students determine through community how they can act to contribute to building God’s Reign.

In American culture, action has been a primary way individuals have defined themselves. Our cultural heroes have, by and large, been men of action. With the recent awareness of women’s historical contributions, heroines too were identified, in many cases, as women of action. And when there is a problem or an emergency, Americans want to act. But in the last decades we have learned that actions that are not rooted in solidarity and sensitivity can often create problems. Evaluations of both governmental and nonprofit programs created to assist people in poverty in the United States indicate that action without the discernment that grows from solidarity can actually hinder

rather than help people. We are now more aware that humanitarian aid and development assistance to people in other countries demand a deep level of sensitivity to, and a respect for, the culture and lifestyle of the recipients—and an invitation to them to participate. During the famine in Ethiopia in the early 1990s, unfortunately, this was not the case. Food was being shipped into the country by aid organizations that set up feeding stations in what they considered central locations. But families had to leave their farms to migrate to the feeding stations, leaving precious growing seedlings unattended and thus ensuring that the cycle of hunger would continue into the next season.

A range of other problems related to how humanitarian aid and development assistance are provided are now being recognized, and agencies such as Catholic Relief Services are being more careful and discerning in how and what they do to help those in need. The World Bank and other international agencies are being called upon to consider the social and environmental impact of development projects they fund and the possible human rights violations that could result from development policies. All over the world, people in poor countries are asking for participation in any development process that will affect them, as well as transparency in decision making and accountability to the community. They are calling for greater discernment and greater mutuality in determining actions and activities that will bring us closer to solving the problems of global hunger and poverty.

These values should not be new to us. Our faith calls us to root action in prayer, reflection, contemplation, and discernment. We are challenged to create solidarity by committing to being with those in suffering, to work with them to understand the causes of injustice, and to bring about a more just world.

In a school situation, we must work to provide our students with opportunities to “be with” people in poverty, both on local and global levels. More schools are realizing that students need to work with one primary population over a period of time for effective community service and service learning. They need to get to know and build relationships with those in poverty whenever possible. We must give them guidance to go into settings with the openness and humility that will allow people to speak to



them in many ways. Students need time to reflect on what they are experiencing, not only through individual journaling but through a time of group reflection and prayer.

Social analysis is reflected in Pope John XXIII's 1961 encyclical *Mater et Magistra (Christianity and Social Progress)*, in the section called "Application of Social Teaching". This section is significant because it reminds us that it is "not enough for Catholics to be instructed, according to the teachings of the Church, on their obligation to act in a Christian manner in economic and social affairs. They must also be shown ways in which they can properly fulfill their duty" to apply the Church's social teaching. The text goes on to declare that there is a necessary process to putting this teaching into effect: "First, the actual situation is examined; then the situation is evaluated carefully, in light of [the Church's] teaching; and then only is it decided what can and should be done" to ensure social justice.

When students start to ask questions, they need to be guided to do some research on the problems they are beginning to recognize. They can do searches on the Internet; teachers can also bring in speakers who work on related social problems.

Because we are part of and responsible members of the global family we must also explore ways to encourage our students to be in solidarity with those suffering around the world. Some schools have begun partnering with counterparts in other countries. The Internet is a valuable tool for greater sharing of stories and lifestyles. Prayers are a primary form of solidarity. They are specific, focusing, for example, on children in Africa forced to take part in military combat. Prayers are an important way of raising consciousness about injustices. As students follow stories and issues in news magazines and newspapers, as well as

in materials produced by Catholic justice and peace groups, they can write prayers that promote solidarity with specific populations. Films, case studies on young people, and other information on global injustices also can be shared and discussed across the curriculum. Organizations such as the Center of Concern (<http://www.coc.org>), Network (<http://www.networklobby.org>), Bread for the World (<http://www.bread.org>), and Maryknoll (www.maryknoll.org), are working to provide more educational resources to promote global solidarity and to identify the links between domestic and global problems.

This openness to developing an authentic solidarity with others is against the grain in the present American culture. We want to do some good, but we also want to go home to sanctuaries of security where all is pleasant and safe. Nevertheless, being open to and really experiencing the pain of others is the only way Catholic social teaching is put into practice. Solidarity is a way of being in the world, of positioning ourselves so we can't easily turn away, so we can recognize the complexities of unjust situations and the necessity of becoming involved. Working to bring about the Reign of God is the vocation to which we all have been called. To be with the suffering Christ and those who suffer today is a great challenge, but it also can bring us great joy.

As Father Jon Sobrino has declared: "The response to the suffering of the poor is an ethical demand, but it is also a path that offers salvation for those who enter into solidarity with the poor. Those who do so recover in their own life the deep meaning that they thought they had lost. They recover their own human dignity by becoming integrated into the pain and suffering of the poor. From the poor they receive in a way they hardly expected and have new eyes to see the ultimate truth of things and new energy for exploring unknown and challenging paths" (Sobrino 150-152).

