

Behold the Man

The Philosophy of Pope John Paul II

Solidarity

by John F. Crosby



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"Behold the Man" is a ten-part series on the personalist philosophy of Pope John Paul II. This is the tenth and final installment.

"Solidarity" was not only the name of the famous Polish labor union which, inspired by the person and teaching of Pope John Paul II, precipitated the non-violent collapse of Communism in Poland and throughout Eastern Europe. Solidarity is also a term that expresses one of the great themes of Pope John Paul's Christian personalism.

Let us return to that extreme individualism discussed in a previous column. That is the view according to which persons are primarily possessors of rights, and *other* persons are primarily potential intruders into one's sphere of rights. The social ideal of this individualism is simply for persons to interact without anyone's rights getting violated. In that column, we examined the personalist teaching that Pope John Paul opposes to this individualism, namely his teaching on the self-donation of one person to another person, as of man and woman to each other.

But what about our life in economic society, or as members of our nation, or of the Church? Is there a place for self-donation not only in the I-Thou relation, but also in the we-relation of the larger communities to which we belong? Pope John Paul answers: The solidarity in which we stand in these communities invites us to new kinds of self-donation. Man as person is made for self-giving solidarity with others, and not for the social isolation that comes from the individualistic concern for one's rights.

Economic Life

Pope John Paul has developed the social teaching of the Church in his three major social encyclicals. In them he repeatedly says that employers must not set up working conditions and hire workers exclusively with an eye to profit; they must also take account of their workers as human persons. He says that it is not enough to avoid violating the rights of workers; employers must also have some concern for the human well-being of their workers. In his philosophical language Pope John Paul puts it like this: There is an objective aspect of work (productivity) and a subjective aspect of work (the flourishing of the worker as human being), and managers should not be exclusively concerned with the former.

And why not? Because of the solidarity in which all human beings stand with each other. We are not ultimately strangers to each other, but exist as fellow human beings. A manager who hires and fires only on the basis of profits and productivity is failing to live the truth about his solidarity with his workers. He thinks of himself as morally isolated from them, when in fact he has a certain co-responsibility for them.

And Pope John Paul adds this profound thought: The manager himself can thrive as person only if he lives his solidarity with his workers and accepts his co-responsibility for their well-being. He also says that it is not enough to exist *with* others, you also have in some way to live *for* others if you have really come into

your own as person. This holds for persons not only in their intimate relations with each other, but also in their socioeconomic relations.

Of course, Pope John Paul sees the danger of depersonalized versions of social solidarity. Again and again in the social encyclicals he denounces what he calls “socialism,” which sees “the individual person simply as an element, a molecule within the social organism, so that the good of the individual is completely subordinated to the functioning of the socioeconomic mechanism.” A person can never exist as a mere part in some whole, like a cell in an organism. As we saw at the beginning of this series, a person is his own end and his own whole. So the solidarity in which we stand with others must be understood as a way in which we are bound together precisely as *persons*.

Ethnic Hatred

It is not only economic injustice that moves the Holy Father to remind men and women of the solidarity in which we all exist; the terrible outbreaks of ethnic hatred that have occurred during his pontificate, especially in Africa and the former Yugoslavia, have also moved him in the same way. In his important address to the United Nations in 1995, he distinguishes between the universal and the particular in the following way: Human nature is universal, common to us all; it knits us together into one human family. The ethnic and cultural identity of a people is something more particular, which is why there can be many different ethnic and cultural groups.

The danger is that those in some particular group demonize those in some other group, forgetting the common humanity that unites them all. Pope John Paul said at the UN: “The fact of ‘difference,’ and the reality of ‘the other’ can sometimes be felt as a burden, or even as a threat. The fear of ‘difference’ can lead to a denial of the very humanity of the ‘the other.’” And so the Holy Father has continually appealed to the consciences of warring peoples, reminding them of the human solidarity that remains intact in the midst of their ethnic differences.

The Communion of Sin

The Holy Father also explores solidarity in its deeper spiritual forms. In his 1984 apostolic exhortation, *Reconciliatio et Paenitentia*, he discusses “social sin,” in the course of which he gives us this rich passage, worthy of close meditation:

“To speak of *social sin* means in the first place to recognize that, by virtue of human solidarity which is as mysterious and intangible as it is real and concrete, each individual’s sin in some way affects others. This is the other aspect of that solidarity which on the religious level is developed in the profound and magnificent mystery of the *communion of saints*, thanks to which it has been possible to say that ‘every soul that rises above itself, raises up the world.’ To this *law of ascent* there unfortunately corresponds the *law of descent*. Consequently one can speak of a *communion of sin*, whereby a soul that lowers itself through sin drags down with itself the Church and, in some way, the whole world. In other words, there is no sin, not even the most intimate and secret one, the most strictly individual one, that exclusively concerns the person committing it. With greater or lesser violence, with greater or lesser harm, every sin has repercussions on the entire ecclesial body and the whole human family” (emphasis added).

It follows from this profound moral and spiritual solidarity that we are all in some way co-responsible for the evils around us. If only we were better, they would be fewer. We should not condemn the evils around us as if we had nothing to do with them, for then we would be yielding to the individualism mentioned above. Our solidarity with our fellow human beings is such that all the wrong that we do, and even if we do it in solitude, has a way of demoralizing all of them.

Solidarity in the Jubilee Year

We can detect this theme of solidarity in some of Pope John Paul’s acts in the Jubilee Year. Certainly his call for a remission by the wealthy countries of the debt of some of the poorer developing countries is based on human solidarity. The Holy Father

means that the countries of the world are connected not only by formal agreements, but by a common humanity, and that they have a co-responsibility for each other even if they never made a point of assuming such responsibility.

But the most striking expression of solidarity in all the Jubilee acts of Pope John Paul II is surely the day of pardon that he held on the first Sunday of Lent, when he led the Church in repenting of different kinds of wrong committed by Christians in the course of the second millennium. People have criticized the Pope for this repentance by saying: Pope John Paul has not harmed any Jews; how can he meaningfully repent of the harm inflicted by other Christians who lived in earlier times? Such a question is vintage individualism; such a questioner is simply out of touch with the moral solidarity in which Pope John Paul stands with all fellow Catholics in all earlier ages. It is true that the Pope is not co-responsible for anti-Semitic crimes committed before his lifetime; such a co-responsibility does not make any sense. But there are different kinds of moral solidarity.

Suppose you are a parent and that a child of yours commits some crime. Is it not perfectly meaningful for you as parent to apologize to the family of the victim, not as if you had some share in the guilt of your child (perhaps your child committed the crime in spite of everything you had taught him or her), but simply out of the moral solidarity that one has with one’s child? It would be that extreme individualism all over again if you thought that you the parent were in no way in the debt of the family of the victim. Well, Pope John Paul II, as head of the Catholic Church, stands in a somewhat similar kind of moral solidarity with all Catholics, living and dead, so that it is entirely meaningful for him to repent of wrong done by Catholics in earlier times. He does not thereby free himself (or anyone else) from any personal guilt, but he “cleanses the memory” of the Church, in which all members stand in a profound moral solidarity with each other. ■