

A RESPONSE TO CHRISTINE FIRER HINZE

I would like to thank Christine Firer Hinze for a very rich, challenging paper that has helped all of us to understand solidarity more precisely and more deeply. I would also like to thank John Thiel for giving me the opportunity to respond to this very fine work.¹

Conceptual or theoretical clarity about the meaning of solidarity is helpful and important, but as we learned from that venerable, furry, blue saint—Grover—in order really to know what solidarity entails, we must see it. Like any other virtue, solidarity is best learned from role models and examples.² It is here that we must turn to the saints. First, let me pause briefly to say that I think that taking solidarity seriously leads us toward a particular understanding of the communion of saints. As Elizabeth Johnson has explained quite eloquently in her book *Friends of God and Prophets*, there has been a tension in the theology of the saints between seeing them as an elite group of paradigmatic figures and understanding the communion of saints to include virtually all Christians. I submit that the virtue of solidarity—marked as it is by a tendency to widen the circle of who counts as “one of us”—provides some grounds for the latter, wider view of the Communion of Saints. Johnson describes this vision well when she writes, “the communion of saints embraces all women and men who hear Holy Wisdom’s call and follow her path of righteousness.”³ This is not to discount or blot out the importance of the great saints of history, but their veneration should not come at the expense of a more inclusive vision of the saints. The saints do not stand above ordinary Christians in hierarchical fashion but instead stand in community with all of us as brothers and sisters—in solidarity.

Christine has already pointed out that this changes our conception of the saints in the sense that we must recognize that the company of saints is dominated by the faces and bodies, the lives and stories, the memories and hopes of the historical nobodies, the poor, the oppressed, and the forgotten majorities throughout

¹I am very grateful to Kari-Shane Davis Zimmerman for reading and offering helpful comments on earlier drafts of this response.

²Joseph J. Kotva, Jr. has summarized this insight quite well: “According to virtue theory, it is in being guided by, following, and imitating masters or worthy examples that we learn to recognize and embody the emotional and intellectual dispositions, habits, and skills designated by the virtues.” See Joseph J. Kotva, Jr., *The Christian Case for Virtue Ethics* (Washington: Georgetown, 1996), 107.

³Elizabeth A. Johnson, *Friends of God and Prophets: A Feminist Theological Reading of the Communion of Saints* (New York: Continuum, 1998), 220.

history to this day—often people of color and women. I affirm that claim, but I want to stress the breadth of the company of saints for other reasons: to explain that the saints help us to see how holiness (and solidarity) find expression in the most ordinary of circumstances and in the full breadth of cultural and social situations, and also to remind us ironically that the saints include the not-so-saintly.⁴

Let me explain what I mean. The call to solidarity is a call to deep conversion. We who are called to solidarity must reorient our lives away from isolated self-centeredness toward a firm and persevering dedication to the common good, to a deeper awareness of relationship, etc. My mind turns to the stories of conversion we find in the New Testament, e.g., James and John dropping the nets they were mending and leaving their father behind to follow Jesus (Mt 4:21-22), as well as Saul falling to the ground and arising to become a new man with a new name (Acts 9). That sort of conversion happens today as well, but it is not the only form conversion takes. Recall that solidarity can also be understood as a virtue—and that growth in virtue is more typically a gradual, deliberate, but nevertheless grace-filled process. If the process is gradual, we need more than the great heroes of our tradition alone to guide us and accompany us down the path of solidarity.

Many of us here today know well the stories of the great saints of solidarity—the Jesuit martyrs of the UCA, Oscar Romero, Jean Donovan, and many others.⁵ These are inspiring figures. Their actions, their words move us to tears. They show us the sort of disciples we wish we could become. We need those heroes. But we also need what might be called intermediate figures who can help us to find our way from the wilderness of twenty-first century globalized capitalism in which most of us are so deeply enmeshed toward a new way of living. When I was first learning about virtue ethics from Jim Keenan, I remember that he spoke of this process of graduality by giving the example of someone who needed to grow in courage. If you are afraid of heights your first step in overcoming it should not be to take a walk across the Brooklyn Bridge, he said. Likewise, if you are deeply embedded in a culture of narcissism and consumerism, your first move is not likely to be to join a base community in the global south.

Over a decade ago, Roger Burggraeve developed the idea of an ethics of mercy, which I submit is illuminative in this regard. On the one hand, Burggraeve

⁴Johnson, 251. Johnson draws helpfully upon Karl Rahner on this point. Writing on the meaning of the Feast of All Saints, Rahner wrote “Where there is not actually the most profound guilt, where there is not diabolical evil, there, ultimately speaking, there are no minor or intermediary degrees of goodness at the end, but only saints.” See Karl Rahner, *Theological Investigations*, Vol. VIII, *Further Theology of the Spiritual Life 2* (New York: Herder and Herder, 1971), 26.

⁵Jon Sobrino, *Companions of Jesus: The Jesuit Martyrs of El Salvador* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1990). Archbishop Oscar Romero, *Voice of the Voiceless: The Four Pastoral Letters and Other Statements*, trans. Michael J. Walsh (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1985). Ana Carrigan, *Salvador Witness: The Life and Calling of Jean Donovan* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1984).

(and I) would affirm that the challenge of the Gospel and of gospel solidarity must not be diluted; disciples of Christ must strive ultimately to live out the fullness of human potential and to reflect charity and all the virtues in their fullness and in all facets of their lives. At the same time, there is a need also to have a deep awareness of the limitations of human beings and our constant need for redemption. An ethics of mercy does not stop by setting forth the ideal of what it looks like to live in a “fully human” manner or to be completely in solidarity with others. Such an ethic is also attentive to the question of how sinful people (i.e., everyone in some way) can be helped to grow toward a fuller, holier life incrementally.⁶ We keep our paradigmatic figures to help us see the ultimate goal, but there must also be attention to the question of what a particular person is able to achieve in their social situation and in their present circumstances and stage of personal development.⁷ It is necessary to begin moral reflection with the human being—the sinner—and their subjective situation in order to accompany them better in a journey from sin, confusion, and disarray toward human fullness.⁸ There is always a dimension of challenge and confrontation of the sin and evil present in our own lives and those with whom we hope to move toward holiness, but the challenge we make must be framed in terms that are subjectively understandable to the individual and realizable in their own context (i.e., it must be gradual process).⁹ For this reason, we must develop models of more ordinary saints, if you will.

I submit that our posture should be one of mercy as we think about how to help one another move toward deeper conversion and a fuller embodiment of solidarity, and this should be our posture when we think about how to help our students to do the same. If we do not exercise mercy, we risk using our theology only to condemn. If we fail to exercise mercy, we risk afflicting those we teach with the paralysis of despair and powerlessness. The purpose of teaching about solidarity

⁶Roger Burggraeve, “Une Ethique de Miséricorde,” *Lumen Vitae* 49 (1994): 281.

⁷Roger Burggraeve, “Meaningful Living and Acting,” *Louvain Studies* 13 (1988): 158. Burggraeve’s article includes an interesting discussion of what is subjectively possible for an individual. He argues not only that people are sometimes incapable of acting freely due to incapacities such as drug addiction, but also that psycho-social conditioning leaves many other people in such a state of moral confusion that they may be incapable of perceiving the right in its fullness. He warns against presenting any ideal so high that it would be completely foreign to people in a state of moral confusion or sin. He frames such an approach in terms of walking with the person in need (rather than in paternalistic terms). The Christian seeks to maximize the possibilities of goodness and meaning available in the horizon of the person in need. See Burggraeve, “Meaningful Living,” 152–55.

⁸Burggraeve, “Une Ethique de Miséricorde,” 292.

⁹Ibid. My discussion of the ethics of mercy in this paragraph is a condensed and lightly revised version of my earlier work. See Christopher P. Vogt, “Recognizing the Addict as Neighbour: Christian Hospitality and the Establishment of Safe Injection Facilities in Canada,” *Theoforum* 35, no. 3 (2004): 317–342.

is not primarily to draw attention to our un-holiness and unworthiness, but to point to real possibilities for deeper living.

So what might a conversion or a turn toward solidarity look like in the concrete? What does a firm and persevering commitment to the common good require?¹⁰ My colleague, Charles Clark—an economist whose work is very deeply informed by Catholic Social Thought—co-edited a book a few years ago entitled *Rediscovering Abundance*.¹¹ In one of the essays that Clark contributed to that volume, he explains how neoclassical capitalism has caused us to think of wealth always in terms of scarcity, i.e., something gains value because it is in short supply.¹² Such a view leads us to see wealth in inherently private and individualistic terms.¹³ Clark claims that Catholic Social Thought encourages us instead to think of wealth as a social good; the economy should be structured to make those things that people need available in abundance. Such a view requires a radical reorientation of the structures of the economy but it also has very profound personal implications that can be acted upon more incrementally. For the catch here is that we cannot simultaneously maintain vast personal fortunes for our own use and abundant or even sufficient public resources that constitute the common good. To live in solidarity—with a commitment to the common good—requires a decision to put what might otherwise serve my private interest to use in the public interest.¹⁴

¹⁰I am partial to Pope John Paul II's definition of solidarity as "a firm and persevering determination to commit oneself to the common good". See John Paul II, *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis*, #38. <http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_30121987_sollicitudo-rei-socialis_en.html>. Accessed 1 June 2011.

¹¹Helen Alford, O.P., Charles M. A. Clark, S. A. Cortright, and Michael J. Naughton, eds., *Rediscovering Abundance: Interdisciplinary Essays on Wealth, Income, and Their Distribution in the Catholic Social Tradition* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2006).

¹²Charles M. A. Clark, "Wealth as Abundance and Scarcity: Perspectives from Catholic Social Thought and Economic Theory," in Alford, Clark, Cortright, and Naughton, eds., *Rediscovering Abundance: Interdisciplinary Essays on Wealth, Income, and Their Distribution in the Catholic Social Tradition* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2006), 28-56, esp. 42-44.

¹³Clark argues that how we conceptualize wealth has very significant, "real world" consequences. Summarizing a major line of his argument, Clark writes, "[I]f wealth is to provide us with abundance, then its creation, distribution, and use should be ordered toward the common good and the protection of human dignity. If it is viewed as primarily created by and for individuals, divorced from the common good and the social nature of property, and if people act on this view, then wealth will be the source of scarcity and will retard human flourishing." See Clark, 30.

¹⁴Recently, many elected officials have pursued the rhetorical strategy of claiming that the government is "broke" in order to justify spending cuts for public goods and services. For example, Governor Scott Walker of Wisconsin used this tactic to justify state cuts to education and to generate support for a bill that severely diminished the ability of many public-sector unions to bargain collectively. See Dan Hinkel and Michael Muskala,

This understanding might be enacted in many different ways and at different levels from voluntary acts of cooperative investment, to various forms of political action that would bring about structural changes in the economy.¹⁵ Thus, Clark's framework could accommodate modest changes as well as dramatic forms of solidarity.

Clark's approach is very much in line with traditional Catholic Social Teaching in the sense that it implies a voluntary and free transition from capitalism as we know it to what we might call an economy of abundance. Thus, it is susceptible to the criticism that it is naïve about power (this comes out in Hinze's point that Catholic Social Teaching is reluctant to embrace political or oppositional solidarity). Therefore, additional models are needed that I cannot develop here. However, I will at least mention one that I think holds great promise. Margaret Pfeil recently described solidarity as a Pneumatological power, i.e., bearing the marks of the Holy Spirit. Instead of proceeding in typically top-down fashion suggested by Catholic Social Teaching, it works from the margins. Pfeil points to Helen Prejean as a model of this approach, which "decenters knowledge as power, relying not upon the dominant influence of certain individuals or institutions, but rather [works] through each member of a community and all together to nurture the common good."¹⁶

My time is up, so let me conclude by saying a few words about the importance of the Communion of Saints as a source of hope. H. Richard Niebuhr once

"Wisconsin Governor: 'We're Broke'; Gov. Walker digs in as latest protest draws 40,000 and legislators remain at large," *Los Angeles Times*, 19 February 2011. Of course, the state is only "broke" because of the governor's own reluctance to raise sufficient funds for government operations; wealth is kept in private hands at the expense of the public good. For a brief, helpful rebuttal to Walker's line of reasoning, see E. J. Dionne, Jr., "We're Dupes if We Fall for 'We're Broke!'," *The Capital Times* (Madison, Wis.), 16 March 2011, 28.

¹⁵Clark's discussion of "helpful use" of wealth is rather open-ended and would seem to include any number of activities that put wealth to work for the common good and the well-being of one's neighbors and community. These might range from rather modest individual decisions (e.g., choosing to direct a portion of one's income toward development assistance) to supporting a political agenda that would use the government to redistribute wealth widely (e.g., a basic income model; see Charles M. A. Clark, "A Basic Income for the United States of America: Ensuring that the Benefits of Economic Progress are Equitably Shared." *The Vincentian Chair of Social Justice, Volume 3*. New York: The Vincentian Center for Church and Society at St. John's University, 1997). The Focolare movement's "Economy of Communion" approach to business or the type of enterprise Benedict XVI's describes in *Caritas in Veritate* – i.e., one that does "not exclude profit, but instead considers it a means for achieving human and social ends" – would both be well-aligned with Clark's approach. See Benedict XVI, *Caritas in Veritate*, #46. On the economy of communion, see Amelia J. Uelman, "*Caritas in Veritate* and Chiara Lubich: Human Development from the Vantage Point of Unity," *Theological Studies* 71 (2010): 40-1.

¹⁶Margaret R. Pfeil, "Wise as Serpents, Innocent as Doves: Strategic Appropriation of Catholic Social Teaching," in *Prophetic Witness: Catholic Women's Strategies for Reform* (New York: Crossroad, 2009), 66.

suggested that the reason why we are not good lies not in the fact that we do not know what goodness looks like. What holds us back is the uncertainty of “whether goodness is powerful, whether it is not forever defeated in actual existence by loveless, thoughtless power.”¹⁷ Likewise, our problem is not primarily that we are unsure of what solidarity means or entails, but rather we are afraid of its fruits. Those with eyes to see know that practicing solidarity can be dangerous. We lack courage. We need hope.

For me, one of the most powerful moments in the entire liturgical year comes at the Easter vigil when we sing the litany of saints. As the congregation makes its way to gather around the waters of baptism, we call out the names of all holy men and women to pray with us, to be with us, to help us know the challenges and the possibilities of the waters of baptism. All the saints great and small stand in solidarity. In some Latin American contexts the hopeful implications of that litany are made more explicit as the acclamation “¡Presente!” is given in response to the names of the blessed dead. Elizabeth Johnson describes the meaning of this act well: “*Presente* [is] a multi-valent term asking that the saint be present, implying that the saint is present, and most basically, affirming the power of the resurrection which makes it possible for the saint to be present. It is a powerful response that commits the community to honor their memory by emulating their lives.”¹⁸ May we find the faith to affirm the presence of the saints among us and to go forward with them in solidarity.

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¹⁷H. Richard Niebuhr, *Faith on Earth: An Inquiry into the Structure of Human Faith*, ed. Richard R. Niebuhr (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1989), 100.

¹⁸Johnson, 254.