

FROM COMFORT AND AMBITION TO UNITY ACROSS DIFFERENCE:
THE CHALLENGE OF SOLIDARITY—SELECTED SESSION

Topic: Catholic Social Ethics
Convener: Raymond Ward, Barry University
Moderator: Christine Fire Hinze, Fordham University
Presenters: Meghan J. Clark, St. John's University
Raymond Ward, Barry University

Meghan Clark began the session with a paper on “An Obligation to be Uncomfortable: Pope Francis and the Challenge of Solidarity (for the Developed World).” In it she examined statements that Francis has made in his early papacy concerning solidarity and argued that they are best characterized as a call to *uncomfortableness* on the part of the privileged rooted in his identification of the incarnate Christ with the poor.

Clark noted that solidarity is a multifaceted feature of Catholic social ethics, variously explained as “an attitude, a duty, a principle, and . . . most comprehensively approached as a virtue.” In the words of Pope Paul II, it is “a *firm and persevering determination* to commit oneself to the common good; that is to say the good of all and of each individual because we are really *all* responsible for *all*” (*Solicitudo rei socialis*, 38). For Francis, Clark argues, the major impediment to the development of this virtue among people in the developed world is their resistance to feeling the moral discomfort that comes with acknowledging overwhelming social injustice: “the problem is the inability to knowingly and willingly be uncomfortable . . . This is a necessary first step toward collaborating for structural change and prompting critical self-reflection into our own participation and complicity in those sinful structures.”

To illustrate Francis’s view of solidarity, Clark highlighted four papal addresses: regarding refugees on the Italian island of Lampedusa, during World Youth Day in the Rio de Janeiro *favela* of Varginha, at the Jesuit Refugee Center in Rome, and during his pastoral visit with inmates, the poor and unemployed youth in Cagliari, Sardinia. Francis consistently laments the “globalization of indifference” in which we choose the illusion of individualism over solidarity with neighbor. The developed world seems even to treat the word “solidarity” as a bad word, Francis observes, forgotten or silenced because it prompts discomfort.

Clark argued that this focus on the *word* of solidarity points to its Christological character. She quoted the official translation of his comments at the Refugee Center: “Solidarity is a word that scares the developed world. People try not to use it. It’s as if it were a swear word to them. But it is our Word!” Francis views solidarity in terms of the Incarnation and *vice versa*, in keeping with the view of Aparecida that we encounter Jesus in the poor as a “constitutive element of our faith in Jesus Christ.” In the end, “Pope Francis’s contribution to Catholic social thought on solidarity thus far is by focusing our attention on the emotional barriers that *harden our hearts* and cause many to turn away from the suffering of others, to turn away from Christ among us.”

Next, Raymond Ward presented a paper on “The University in Solidarity: Policies on Wealth, Immigration Status, and Academic Preparedness.” The first part of the paper summarized Gerald Beyer’s critique of the trend among some Catholic

universities to exclude poor students in the pursuit of elite academic status. Using Pell Grants recipients as a rough measure of economic diversity, Beyer showed that elite Catholic universities fair no better, and often do worse, than their secular peers in making college education accessible to poor students. Ward used more recent data to show that several schools have made economic diversity an institutional priority, and that among elite universities there seems to be a trend in great numbers of Pell Grant students. However, many middle tier schools, both Catholic and secular, have pursued admission and financial aid strategies that favor wealthy students.

Ward then made the case that the call of Catholic colleges and universities to solidarity with the poor should further extend to the related issues of academic preparedness and immigration status. He argued, firstly, that “Catholic higher education should not be a strict academic meritocracy.” And secondly, based both historical ties between American Catholic higher education and immigrant communities, and the future of the Church in the United States with Hispanic immigrants in particular, Catholic schools should lead by example and enroll greater numbers of immigrant students, even those with difficulties in their immigration status.

Ward closed the paper with an analogy between the habits of an individual and the structures of an institution, arguing that the structures that pattern institutional actions can be assessed in terms of “institutional virtues.” Solidarity is a virtue that is particularly well-suited to this analysis, since it entails bonds of commitment and mutuality between communities, not simply individuals. “This real presence of the poor in the university, welcomed into a place of honor and care, is the challenge and gift of solidarity to Catholic universities, as it is for the Church.”

An energetic discussion followed, with questions and comments honing in on the incarnational theology of Pope Francis and the kinds of practical steps that can be taken to illustrate the presence of Christ among the poor, as well as the administrative and financial challenges facing many Catholic colleges as they pursue their educational mission.

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