

A RESPONSE TO JIM KEENAN

I begin by thanking Jim for his powerful words. Kentucky farmer and essayist Wendell Berry has a saying: “Abstraction is the enemy wherever it is found.”¹ Perhaps literary exaggeration, but certainly an idea central to Jim’s thesis, that “we must write with more passion, more imagination, and more dependence on narrative” to communicate the urgency of solidarity to a larger audience. After all, he is testifying to a strange impasse: the presence of a pervasive and urgent discourse, a liberal/conservative “consensus” about human dignity and solidarity, but in the midst of a world that imposes the opposite – alienation and isolation – on a massive scale. How can that be? And, more importantly, how can we move “beyond” the impasse?

To do so, in the spirit of Jim’s paper, I am going to draw especially on the work of Jean Vanier. As I was initially reading Jim’s paper, I recalled that I have my students begin Catholic Social Thought by reading Vanier’s writings on what he calls “belonging” – before getting into the documents on solidarity.² Why? Precisely because his is an embodied narrative, a concrete, affecting example of solidarity in action. However, his work also displays some of the complexities of solidarity and affectivity. Plus, he is a Canadian! Therefore, I will proceed in three stages: First, by explaining Vanier’s conceptions of solidarity and affectivity, second, by indicating how these challenge the “style” of theological ethics and of the academy, and third, by anticipating an objection to using Vanier as a response to global suffering.

THE DYNAMICS OF ALIENATION AND SOLIDARITY

First, on solidarity. All of us gathered here can reel off the standard litany of oppressive “structures of sin” that conspire to create the alienation Jim describes, and which also create a different kind of alienation for “us,” for those who live the life of the rich man, rather than Lazarus. As Jim notes, the loss of solidarity happens on both sides, and individualism now infects poorer nations as well. What

¹Wendell Berry, *Sex, Economy, Freedom, and Community* (New York: Pantheon, 1994), 23.

²Uzochukwu Jude Njoku writes a wonderful discussion about how the principle of solidarity is often “too ambiguous” (535) in its present use, favoring abstract images over concrete structural and historical analyses. See “Rethinking Solidarity as a Principle of Catholic Social Teaching: Going Beyond *Gaudium et Spes* and the Social Encyclicals of John Paul II,” *Political Theology* 9 (2008): 525-544.

causes this alienation? Multinational corporations? Racist and sexist ideologies? Corrupt dictatorships? The academy and the church? If this were a multiple-choice question, we would want an “all of the above” answer... and more. As Chris Vogt writes, solidarity involves “acquiring true knowledge about the world” and how it works, so that our “situation of interdependence is transformed...”³ Thus, true knowledge about causes is indispensable for effective action.

Perhaps we remain unable to break through these impasses because our desire to assign blame to this or that culprit simply *reorients* the impasse, rather than moving *beyond* it.⁴ Vanier’s work helps us here. Vanier offers us a picture of the journey from loneliness to belonging that carefully recognizes *two* different sorts of belonging. Some belonging, he says, is primarily about “protection and... security,” about affirming our own identities, and about using the group to prove our worth and perhaps even our superiority over others.⁵ This sort of belonging simply leads to a different sort of loneliness and isolation, since often such groups require absolute fidelity to standards for participation, and of course they array themselves over against other groups. There may be a sort of solidarity here, but it is not the solidarity of the Catholic tradition, which affirms, as John Paul II notes, “we are all really responsible for all.”⁶

Vanier further describes three elements of this “bad” solidarity: the certitude of superiority of the group, the refusal to admit weaknesses in the self or the group (thus ignoring what Vanier calls elsewhere “the enemy within”⁷), and a division of the rest of the world into “good” and “bad,” into allies and enemies, based on their relation to the group’s truth.⁸ We can sadly identify these dynamics at work everywhere, in groups on *both* sides of any and every issue. It is a fight, and we need to be on the winning side.

It is here where Vanier makes what I would regard as his deepest contribution: he says that underneath all these dynamics is a single claim: to be fully

³See Christopher Vogt, “Fostering a Catholic Commitment to the Common Good: An Approach Rooted in Virtue Ethics,” *Theological Studies* 68 (2007): 403.

⁴See also Pope Benedict XVI, “Address to the Members of the ‘Centessimus Annus’ Foundation,” where he states: “True social justice, furthermore, can only be possible in a perspective of genuine solidarity that commits people to live and work always for one another and never against or to the detriment of others. Thus, to achieve this in practice in the context of the contemporary world is the great challenge of Christian lay people.” Accessed at: <http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/benedict_xvi/speeches/2006/may/documents/hf_ben-xvi_spe_20060519_centessimus-annus_en.html>.

⁵*Becoming Human* (New York: Paulist Press, 1998), 35. Cf. *Community and Growth*, revised ed. (New York: Paulist Press, 1989), 17-18, where Vanier worries about the “elitism” of such groups.

⁶Pope John Paul II, *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis*, paragraph 38.

⁷*Community and Growth*, 34-35.

⁸*Becoming Human*, 47.

human is to become powerful.⁹ That is, impasses arise because we (implicitly or explicitly) adopt a normative anthropology. We form groups and alliances based on protecting power or creating power or taking power away from others. This “anthropology of powerfulness” ends up pervading our lives as a normative goal. What is its antidote? Needless to say, Vanier identifies this as Jesus, who gives us a picture of humanity – and of divinity! – that is about weakness and vulnerability, rather than about powerfulness. Thus, real solidarity comes into being not on the basis of shared *power* but shared *weakness*.¹⁰ Solidarity is recognizing that chaos, loneliness, and division are there for all of us, no matter how hard we try to cover it over with achievements or righteousness or possessions. L’Arche acts as a model of community where we can move from the chaos of isolation to belonging, but only through shared weakness. Jim himself describes this pattern beautifully in his book on the works of mercy, where he describes Christian mercy as “a willingness to enter into the chaos of others,” a willingness that is ultimately based on our own encounter with God’s mercy, God’s own entering into the chaos of the world and of our own lives.¹¹

One of Vanier’s most important insights in L’Arche work is that people come to L’Arche to *help* the poor, but instead discover that they *are* the poor.¹² We are prone to hide our suffering, but one of the gifts that L’Arche core members give is that this strategy of evasion is unavailable to them. Their directness and vulnerability quite immediately invites visitors to give up their middle-class defenses and become vulnerable themselves. Thus, solidarity happens. As Vanier writes, “Community comes about when people are no longer hiding from one another, no longer pretending or proving their value to one another.”¹³ I have seen this experience replicated in so many other contexts in my own life – in high school service work with children in the housing project of Chicago, in al-anon groups, in a parish community of young adults in Washington, DC, with a pastor insisting, over and over, that in that very status-conscious, highly-educated, competitive place,

⁹*Becoming Human*, 46.

¹⁰Another approach to this idea would be through Alasdair MacIntyre’s appeal to the Lakota virtue of “wancantognaka,” which is something like just generosity in relationships of acknowledged dependence. See *Dependent Rational Animals: Why Human Beings Need the Virtues* (LaSalle, IL: Open Court, 1999), 120. This text from MacIntyre is often overlooked in favor of his grand narratives, but its discussion of the virtues needed for community, and in particular the ways in which we are all “disabled” in various ways in our lives, fits unexpectedly well with Vanier’s work.

¹¹James F. Keenan, S.J., *The Works of Mercy: The Heart of Catholicism* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2005), 9.

¹²Jean Vanier, *The Heart of L’Arche: A Spirituality for Everyday* (New York: Crossroad, 1995). Henri Nouwen describes the “radical self-confrontation” (220) that he experienced when he entered a L’Arche community in *The Road to Daybreak: A Spiritual Journey* (New York: Image, 1988).

¹³*Community and Growth*, 24.

we simply tell our stories and struggles to one another. In every case, the power of vulnerability has created solidarity. Making the risky sacrifice of self, rather than the assertion of self, brings about solidarity.

AFFECTIVITY AND SUFFERING

The urgency of sacrificing and vulnerable sharing is something we all feel, at specific times – and we know it is rooted in *love*, not simply knowledge. Therefore, these examples point directly to a second theme in Jim’s talk: the importance of *affectivity* for ethics. By speaking to people’s emotions, he suggests we can “sympathetically tap into the suffering of the isolationists.” Jim makes reference to William James’ “sick soul,” and how the experience of our own illness can become a site for greater solidarity. Jim “deliberately taps in” to our own experiences because he argues that “the key to advancing solidarity in the face of impasse is an ability to live with one’s own suffering.” Jim’s Manila experience demonstrates that his own suffering enabled him to become more in solidarity with others.

However, not everyone reacts to suffering in this way. Encountering suffering always produces feelings in us, but sometimes these are hostile. Some become sick, and the fruits are bitterness and further isolation. “Affectivity,” like solidarity, has two sides. For Vanier, “the heart” is not only a place of potential communion, but the seat of our deepest fears, our deepest worry that our identities or even our lives might be threatened if we begin to act (or even feel) solidarity with those who suffer. Why? Perhaps this is because, as Vanier notes, we may be willing to give food to a beggar, but when faced with many beggars or with the beggar’s constant return, “we are worried that the beggar is calling on us to change our lifestyle.”¹⁴ To help the beggar, we might have to risk suffering ourselves.¹⁵ The willingness to take on suffering is “good,” in the sense that it can be a path to healing and communion.

Yet isn’t suffering an evil to be avoided at all costs? A corollary of the modern anthropology of powerfulness is the ethical imperative to eliminate all human suffering.¹⁶ But this desire consistently runs us into virtually every major ethical debate we have. We can in fact feed and employ everyone in the world – maybe – but only if we burn more and more fossil fuel. We can in fact cure every disease – maybe – if we are willing to manipulate the human genetic code, perhaps by using stem cells harvested from embryos. Thus, the potential list of ethical

¹⁴*Becoming Human*, 80.

¹⁵Virtue theorists would note here that one of the reasons why we need the virtues is so that our affective responses to our experiences are appropriate and accurate, rather than distorted by things like prejudice, irrational fear, and the like. See William Mattison, *Introducing Moral Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2008), chapter 4.

¹⁶See Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989), 281-282, for a discussion of modern “benevolence.”

conflicts goes on, all with the underlying desire to eliminate suffering, want, and hardship.

At worst, the modern project sets out to eliminate exactly the core members of the L'Arche communities. If only "they" could just be made like "us," everything would be great. Obviously, this is the normative anthropology of powerfulness at work. Instead of the elimination of suffering, Vanier is thinking in terms of "suffering-with" – in terms of compassion. The modern project often *poses* as a project of compassion, but it is *ultimately* a project of autonomy and individualism – it seeks not to suffer with others, but to eliminate the suffering – usually by various bureaucratic or technical means, which do not require us to be in communion with those who suffer.¹⁷ Vanier tells a remarkable (and provoking) story of meeting with an ordinary man who had much sadness in his life. During the meeting, they were interrupted by a L'Arche member who simply laughed all the time and took great joy from just coming into Vanier's office and shaking his hand. When the L'Arche member had left, the sad man began to lament how sad it was that people were so handicapped. Vanier notes the irony that it was the man, not the L'Arche member, who was unhappy, and he explains: "Fundamentally, when people start lamenting because there are people with handicaps in our world, the question is whether it is sadder that there are people with handicaps or that there are people who reject them. Which is the greater handicap?"¹⁸

Now of course getting beyond this impasse does not mean to *romanticize* suffering, any more than Vanier's communities reject the need for professional help and medical care. It does suggest, however, that the elimination of suffering should not be the overriding ethical imperative. Rather, the overriding imperative is not rejecting those who are suffering. Theologically, Jesus' body is a broken one, and he is offered specifically the temptations to avoid such suffering. Yet the broken body becomes the site of healing.¹⁹ This is mysterious, just as is the dynamic where we gain power by being weak. Here, we gain healing by entering into suffering, by opening ourselves to it. So suffering is not a good in itself, but the dynamic Vanier displays is that we receive real fullness of life not by fleeing suffering at all costs, but by sharing in it well so that all might have truly abundant life. Further careful analyses of these subtle dynamics would follow Jim's call for renewal in the way we do moral theology.

¹⁷See Hauerwas, "Should Suffering Be Eliminated?" in *The Hauerwas Reader*, eds. Michael Cartwright and John Berkman (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2001), 556-576.

¹⁸*Images of Love, Words of Hope* (Hansport, NS: Lancelot Press, 1991), 94-95. Quoted in *Jean Vanier: Essential Writings*, selected with an introduction by Carolyn Whitney-Brown (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2008), 53-54.

¹⁹See Joel Shuman, *The Body of Compassion: Ethics, Medicine, and the Church* (New York: Westview Press, 1999).

CHANGING THE WAY WE DO ETHICS

These insights lead to two specific challenges for doing theological ethics beyond the impasse. The first challenge is that of our institutional setting, of the academy. It is very appropriate that Jim concludes his talk by holding our feet to the fire, calling into question our own academic structures. Here again, Vanier is helpful – in REALLY holding our feet to the fire. Because who is Jean Vanier? Son of the governor general of Canada, accomplished leader, Ph.D. – and so what does he end up doing? Getting on the tenure track? No, he moves into a run-down house in a tiny French village with two mentally handicapped strangers, and begins the daily work of making a home with them. That was 1964, and I can practically guarantee that no one thought he would be being invoked in a CTSA address or be Canadian person of the year.²⁰ And he did it by *leaving* the academy.

Jim emphasizes our need to get outside the academy, but I would add a different worry: even within our institutions, what we do in theology often (not always) cuts against the grain of the rest of the institution. We do not need all our graduates to go off and join L'Arche. Yet it is frustrating to see Catholic institutions graduating large numbers of students who not only conform to our society's skewed notions of success, but also learned this ideal of success from the institutions themselves, which market themselves based on these notions of success. Much is made about the crisis of Catholic higher education; the real crisis is that we do not judge ourselves based on how many of our graduates, for example, go take hapless community organizing jobs in poor city neighborhoods! Our institutions themselves perpetuate alienation and the lack of solidarity by failing to run business programs, for example, which recognize that the standards for business success as defined in Catholic tradition are in many ways quite different from those of society. Chris Hinze's recent essay responding to the financial crisis applies solidarity, as well as a number of other elements of Catholic social teaching, to the problem, but do our business programs make these connections clear?²¹ Do our business programs offer the kind of rigorous and thorough application of Catholic social teaching to actual business practices exemplified by, for example, John Medaille's *The Vocation of Business*?²² I fear not; I fear we educate for success, not for solidarity. We educate our students into the normative anthropology of powerfulness. We do not often enough, institutionally, make it clear that the privileges of education are not primarily for personal advancement, but for the life of the world, for us to become instruments of solidarity. Why? Alasdair MacIntyre

²⁰For an excellent overview of Vanier's unique journey, see Carolyn Whitney-Brown's introduction to *Jean Vanier: Essential Writings*, 13-51.

²¹Christine Firer Hinze, "Social and Economic Ethics," *Theological Studies* 70 (2009): 170.

²²New York: Continuum, 2007.

points out that the modern research university by its very structure promotes the isolation of disciplinary knowledge, and so despite our eloquent mission statements, we at the same time pursue the same marks of institutional respectability and prestige sought by the fragmented academy.²³

The second challenge is to the basic ethical language we use. Typically, in modernity, every ethical problem devolves into an impasse between the assertion of rights and the principle of utility, with eliminating suffering most often the greatest good.²⁴ The language of “assertion of rights” veers dangerously toward the normative anthropology of powerfulness and autonomy. The language of utility almost always involves attempts to minimizing pain at any cost. Getting beyond this impasse, it seems to me, is critical to doing ethics that fosters solidarity. Jim rightly points us toward a new “style” for theological ethics, a more personal style. Nevertheless, I would ask us to reflect on the dynamics of solidarity in our homes and our friendships: does it involve insistence on rights or the calculation of minimizing suffering? Quite the contrary. As Vanier points out, genuine solidarity comes when we are in relationships where we are willing to suffer with one another, and where we are willing to give up our claims of abstract justice toward one another.

Now, I very much do not want to be misunderstood here. The language I have suggested here can be and has been abused – and it has its place, particularly in the very necessary function of political systems. It is more a question of which language is “in charge” of the discourse – which language shapes our moral agency. The unconstrained use of languages of rights or of utility calculations obscures the much more difficult work of solidarity, the side of solidarity that requires and accepts suffering and sacrifice and mutual dependence. Yes, this language has been abused. But, just as Jim has done in his talk, we need to find ways to reinvigorate it. If a generation of Catholic ethicists has been influenced by (some might say, corrupted by!) studying under Stanley Hauerwas, it is not at all because we are indifferent to the world’s suffering and secretly yearn to become “sectarian tribalists.”²⁵ It is because for almost forty years, Hauerwas has been working out ethics in terms Jim here emphasizes: of narrative, liturgy, virtue, and

²³MacIntyre, *God, Philosophy, Universities* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2009), 16-17.

²⁴See, for a brief explanation, MacIntyre’s “Plain Persons and Moral Philosophy,” in *The MacIntyre Reader*, ed. Kelvin Knight (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1998), 136-152, esp. 145-147.

²⁵The accusation that Hauerwas’ work leads to a tribalism of withdrawal is seen most vividly in James Gustafson’s CTSA address “The Sectarian Temptation: Reflections on Theology, the Church, and the University,” *Proceedings of the Catholic Theological Society of America* 40 (1985): 83-94. Hauerwas responds to this claim in “Why the ‘Sectarian Temptation’ is a Misrepresentation: A Response to James Gustafson,” in *The Hauerwas Reader*, 90-110. My (ironic) use of the term here is evidently not an endorsement of it.

the normative anthropology of Jesus, all in an *accessible* style that remains theoretically rigorous. Thus, his work transcends the rights-versus-utility, norms-versus-proportionalism debates that have plagued conventional American Catholic moral theology.

CONSIDERING AN OBJECTION

References to Hauerwas lead me to my final “impasse.” Surely, the chief objection to invoking Vanier in response to Jim’s stories of impasse is that it is too small – far too small – in the face of the enormity of the problem. Thus, it is really an evasion. This is a fair claim – the problems are enormous, and for those of us with privilege, we may truly feel how much more ambitious we need to be. Indeed, here we meet another “impasse” in theological ethics, analyzed in recent texts such as Kristin Heyer’s, the impasse between “sectarians” and those who advocate for a more public theology.²⁶ How might we try to move beyond this impasse?

I think it is helpful here to distinguish between what I will call “macro-solidarity” and “micro-solidarity.” Vanier’s description of micro-solidarity should not be understood as ignoring macro-solidarity. If we accept Vanier’s claims about the concrete dynamics of micro-solidarity, we can then question how they can be instantiated on a macro level.

I think the impasse between public and (so-called) “sectarian” theologies is best understood as a difference over the ultimate concrete location of macro-solidarity. Specifically, over modern social *institutions* as vehicles for solidarity. Charles Taylor (another Canadian!) offers a way beyond this impasse, for, unlike pure sectarians, he affirms as deeply Christian the basic modern impulse of universal human dignity and solidarity that animates modern institutions. But he also recognizes the actual effects of the modern project: “what we got was not a network of agape, but a disciplined society in which categorical relations have primacy....”²⁷ What Taylor means is that instead of mutual love, we got *abstractions* – we got networks called “the market” or “public opinion” or “individual rights,” and so we became embedded in these groups.²⁸ However, these can become just as much a source of conflict as “tribe” or “clan.” Thus, he is concerned

²⁶See Kristin E. Heyer, *Prophetic and Public: The Social Witness of U.S. Catholicism* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2006).

²⁷Charles Taylor, *Modern Social Imaginaries* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004), 66.

²⁸Jean Porter, “The Search for a Global Ethics,” *Theological Studies* 62 (2001): 105-122, also notes that such large-scale structures of solidarity generally rely on lists of goods that are necessarily vague or empty of concrete meaning. Lisa Cahill, “Toward Global Ethics,” *Theological Studies* 63 (2002): 322-344, responds that this is not the case, but that there is broad, cross-cultural agreement about goods, but disagreement over access to those goods. Adjudicating these competing claims goes far beyond this paper, but I find Taylor’s

that large-scale attempts to instantiate agape, or solidarity, instead end up creating impersonal bureaucratic institutions to which we all become enslaved, and whose rules and dynamics end up fostering division rather than the hoped-for solidarity.

Why? Part of the reason lies in the danger inherent in commitments to abstractions, rather than to actual people. As Vanier points out, “In community people care for each other and not just community in the abstract....”²⁹ But Taylor also worries that these institutions fundamentally become “secular” rather than sacramental – that is, they are conceived of as entirely worldly and immanent, like the Newtonian universe under the Deist god –designed to run without God’s grace. In his most recent work, Taylor encapsulates his worries through the category of “closed world structures” (CWSs), which he describes as “ways of restricting our grasp of things which are not recognized as such.”³⁰ Such structures make significant epistemological assumptions, in particular supported by notions of autonomous selfhood and the purely natural knowledge of the material world through modern science.³¹ Taylor is a marvelous figure for getting beyond the public/sectarian impasse because, unlike some public theologies, he is not naïve about the forces that have constructed modern social orders and their inherent (if unintentional) exclusion of the transcendent. On the other hand, unlike radicals, he does not believe that modern structures are *necessarily* closed in this way; thus, for example, in the public discourse in Canada, he has proposed a notion of “open secularity.”³²

Catholics are particularly able to appropriate Taylor’s cautious-but-engaged perspective on modern structures precisely because our ultimate hope for universal macro-solidarity is neither secular nor sectarian, but sacramental. A sacramental vision of macro-solidarity hopes for universal unity– not because of a human mechanism or even an impersonal one, but because of our reception of God’s gracious activity, to which we respond. A sacramental vision says that it is nothing other than Christ’s body that is the “mechanism” within which we find ourselves, find others, and become one. Pope Benedict reminds us that Catholic hope is not for individual, otherworldly salvation. Rather, the Pope says, salvation is a “social reality,” it is “communal,” and sin is “the destruction of the unity of the human race” and redemption “appears as the reestablishment of unity, in which we come

approach helpful because he focuses on the dynamics of the structures themselves instead of on the question of whether or not philosophical agreement is possible.

²⁹*Community and Growth*, 20.

³⁰See Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007), 551.

³¹*A Secular Age*, 558.

³²See an article on the 2008 Taylor-Bouchard commission at <<http://www.canadian-christianity.com/nationalupdates/080604quebec.html>> . I thank Carolyn Sharp for directing me to this report and reminding me of the specifically Canadian context for analyzing Taylor’s work.

together once more.”³³ He criticizes the “narrowly individualistic” vision of salvation as a “flight from responsibility” and even “selfish.”³⁴ It has “limited the horizon of its hope and has failed to recognize sufficiently the greatness of its task.”³⁵ This seems to me the Vatican II vision for the church, the church not as vehicle of individual salvation, but as the sacrament of Christ to the world. I end simply by suggesting that maybe this sacramental vision of macro-solidarity is the one that might get us beyond the impasse.

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³³*Spe Salvi*, paragraph 14. He is here drawing on Henri de Lubac's *Catholicism: Christ and the Common Destiny of Man*, trans. Lancelot C. Sheppard and Sister Elizabeth Englund, OCD (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1988). The Ignatius Press edition includes a very illuminating forward by the Pope himself.

³⁴*Spe Salvi*, paragraph 16.

³⁵*Spe Salvi*, paragraph 25. Elsewhere, the Pope, as Cardinal Ratzinger, writes that the intent of Vatican II was “to endow Christianity once more with the power to shape history,” over against privatistic and subjective ideas of religion (*Introduction to Christianity*, preface to the new edition (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2004), 13.