

## **‘We are all responsible for all’ (John Paul II, *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis*, On Social Concern, 1987) What does this really mean?**

*Solidarity is ‘not a feeling of vague compassion or shallow distress at the misfortunes of so many people, both near and far. On the contrary, it is a firm and persevering determination to commit oneself to the common good; that is to say to the good of all and of each individual because we are all really responsible for all’ (SRS, 38)<sup>1</sup>.*

The above statement suggests that solidarity is more than a feeling even if it involves compassion or a fellow-feeling. Feeling sorry for those who are suffering is what makes us human but, Saint John Paul II, invites us to think even more deeply about solidarity.

The Latin root of the word solidarity is ‘*solidum*’ which can be translated as ‘entirety’, ‘firmness’ and ‘wholeness’. What does it mean to think of solidarity in these terms? It can mean the following:

- (a) **Wholeheartedness:** a whole-hearted recognition of humanity in everyone, regardless of their gender, race, nationality, sexual orientation, religious or non-religious affiliation or their place and status in society.
- (b) **Inclusion:** we are all part of one big human family. Human family is incomplete when individuals are excluded. Every human being matters. At the entrance to Cardinal Hume Centre (which helps people to overcome poverty and homelessness) in London, there is a plaque with the words of its founder, Cardinal Basil Hume: ‘each person matters; no human life is redundant’. A true solidarity is built on the commitment to the good and well-being of everyone.
- (c) **Totality:** it is similar to inclusion but it emphasizes geographical dimension of solidarity-as-wholeness. Catholic Social Teaching calls us to recognise that we are meant to care for others, not only ourselves. Moreover, we are to care not only for those who are close to us such as our friends, family and pets but also for those who are far away from us. Solidarity is global.
- (d) **Wholeness of Creation:** solidarity-as-wholeness extends beyond human beings and includes the whole of creation with its non-human content (the whole natural environment).

We may want to ask: Is John Paul II unrealistic when he says ‘we are all responsible for all’? Perhaps he is idealistic but he is not unrealistic. Solidarity, the good of all (the common good) and responsibility are ideals or guiding principles but they are also practical. They become ‘solid’ or concrete in practice: in our attitudes towards each other and in our acceptance of others as fellow human beings who, like us, belong to the same human family and the family of God, even if we see them as different from us or when we disagree with them. These ideals become real when we believe in and practice our *inter-dependence*. We need others in order to live and they need us so that they too can live. There are times when others sacrifice time, pleasure and resources for us, and there are times when we are called to do the same for others. This is not always easy. It can be a burden. But, it is what conditions human and social flourishing. Failure to think about our interdependence and to create society without the common good makes society sick. So, why vote in the election? In order to ensure that the common good or the big society or the public welfare are protected and fostered and social ills, through solidarity-as-wholeness, addressed and healed. *Sollitudo Rei Socialis* reminds us that the political community exist for the common good. In the end, ‘we are all responsible for all’.

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<sup>1</sup> [http://www.vatican.va/holy\\_father/john\\_paul\\_ii/encyclicals/documents/hf\\_jp-ii\\_enc\\_30121987\\_sollicitudo-rei-socialis\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_30121987_sollicitudo-rei-socialis_en.html), accessed on 4 November 2014

## Solidarity as Wholeness

