

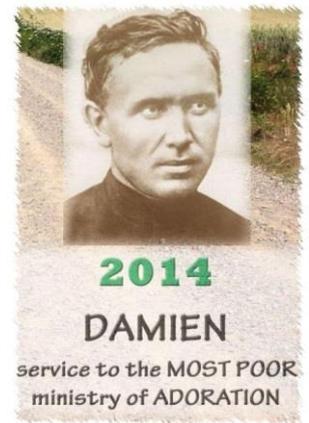
Solidarity with the poor

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Let us go towards the people!

Such is our duty. This word would be cold if it did not mean that the love that binds us to our neighbor also binds us to God, "with all our heart, with all our soul and with all our strength."

Homily by
Blessed Gonzalo Barrón Nandreares SSCC,
Martyr

Why do we have to speak about solidarity with the poor? Isn't it enough to do for them and to help them as far as we can? It is one thing to help the poor, it's another to be in solidarity with them.

A Tough Word

Many times in recent weeks in Congregational meetings, I heard these questions asked. Some brothers are uncomfortable with the word "solidarity." They are right. They are conscious that the word *solidarity* carries tough content. If one does not take it lightly (as often happens) *solidarity* implies a change of life style, an identification with others, and not just doing a few things to the benefit of the underprivileged.

Last October 28, Pope Francis in conversation with the participants of the World of Popular Movements said that that the word *solidarity* means "much more than some actions of sporadic generosity... Solidarity understood in its deeper sense is a way of making history."

The etymology of the word *solidarity* indicates becoming one with another, forming one body, sharing the same lot, sharing the same conditions in life. Citing St. Thomas Aquinas, *Evangelii Gaudium*, notes that "what the Holy Spirit mobilizes is not an unruly activism, but above all an attentiveness which considers the other in a certain sense as one with ourselves" (199). This *being one with the other* makes up the essence of *solidarity*.

Solidarity understood in a Christian way can only be motivated by the principal commandment, the command to love. Solidarity consists in an overflow of love, an expansion of the movement of compassion towards the other which carries the folly of not only doing for the one loved but desiring to be identified with him or her.

We can do many things for many persons without being ourselves in solidarity with them, that is to say without substantially changing our manner of life and how we organize ourselves. This is the source of the uneasiness of which I spoke at the beginning. Is it not better to continue living as we do and from there do things for others instead of getting all tangled up being in solidarity with them?

Models of Solidarity

The theological model of solidarity is that of the incarnation of the Son of God in **Jesus**. The Word of God became flesh and tented among us (John 1:14). Christ emptied himself taking the condition of a servant making himself similar to humans and appearing as any human (Phil 2:7). Could God have helped us without becoming one of us? A rhetorical question without an answer! What happened in fact was the coming of Immanuel, the mystery of God-with-us. God was in solidarity with humankind. Genuine initiatives of solidarity which transform our lives arise from the contemplation of this mystery and the interior dialogue of love with Jesus Christ. For the believer solidarity is not an ideology about which we debate but the consequence of a mystery which engulfs us. How do we concretely make this happen? The question can only be answered out of loving contemplation of the mystery of Jesus.

In the life of the **Good Father** there is an anecdote which makes us think of authentic solidarity. As we all know, on one occasion when the young Pierre Coudrin clandestinely assisted the sick in a hospital in Poitiers he had to pass himself off as a vagabond to escape the police who were pursuing him. Since then the name of a particular vagabond, "Marche-à-terre" stuck as one of his nicknames. In a practical way but also symbolic, the founder not only served the sick and the abandoned of the hospital but he identified with them, taking their place, receiving their name. That's solidarity.

Damien, whose year we are ending, was without doubt an extreme case of the folly of solidarity. The care of the persons with leprosy on Molokai could have been handled otherwise: rotation of priests, periodic presence in the colony, timely pastoral care... but Damien chose to be one with them: "*we lepers*." In this sense he had solidarity with those whom he served. He shared their lot. He became a leper. And at the height of his folly, if it would have been proposed to him to leave Molokai to seek a cure, he would have responded: "*I remain forever with my beloved lepers*." What overflow!

Natural Solidarities

With whom are we in solidarity? To whom do we tie our lives to the point of conditioning our lot with theirs?

In a marriage, spouses commit to being in solidarity. Where one goes the other also goes. Where one lives the other lives as well. Whatever they have, they share. In joys and in sorrows, they are together.

In our case, our profession gives us solidarity with the brothers of the Congregation. "Our religious profession... creating bonds of solidarity among us and making us members of one and the same family." (Constitutions 12:3) This solidarity is more evident in the local community and on the Provincial level which are more concrete and closer to us. There

we place all in common, we share table and roof, we care for each other, we reflect and work together. Other brothers decide my place of life and mission. We are in solidarity. We run the same gamut. What affects one affects all and vice versa.

In a real and transformed way, we maintain solidarity with our natural families. Yes we leave father, mother, siblings... to follow Jesus in religious life but the bonds of blood are not annulled but continue to claim affection and attention. Many brothers dramatically feel the claim of this solidarity when members of their families suffer. The response which they give to these needs ought to articulate two solidarities: religious community and family. There will be fierce tensions; however brothers do not have to fear facing them. Prayer and discernment are called for to make in all freedom a good decision.

Others will feel the call to solidarity with respect to culture, country, certain friendships, certain Christian communities, to groups of varying genre.

The basic question is always: with whom do I play out my life? Who shapes my lot? With whom do I identify? Jesus invites us to go beyond our natural solidarities: "do not invite your friends or your brothers or your relatives or your wealthy neighbors... invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind." (Luke 14:12-13) If we imagine our lives as a banquet at which we choose our table companions, let us ask ourselves who are those invited to the feast of our lives.

Solidarity with the Poor

Let us return to the initial questions: ought we to be in solidarity with the poor or is doing for them enough?

Solidarity with the poor entered into the language of the Congregation in the General Chapter of 1982 which proposed "the construction of a more just world in solidarity with the poor" as the primary orientation for renewal. The Superior General Pat Bradley developed this orientation in one of his circular letters which served so much for the animation of the Congregation.

The General Chapter of 1988 introduced this language into the present Constitutions. The point of departure is a basic solidarity: "we wish to identify with the attitude of Jesus and his reparative work" (Constitution 4). From there "we feel ourselves to be in solidarity with the men and women who are victims of injustice, hatred and sin in the world." (Art. 4) Article 6 specifies: "in solidarity with the poor, we work for a just and reconciled society."

In the chapter dedicated to poverty, the Constitutions go further with an urgent invitation: "The mission of the Congregation leads us to share the life of the poor and to take up their cause, knowing that solidarity with them can bring us face to face with a world marked by injustice." (25:1) This has to have practical consequences in our life style. "A simple life style in solidarity with the poor is a decisive factor for the vitality of our entire religious life." (30:1).

In the recent magisterium of Pope Francis closeness to and friendship with the poor appear as essential characteristics of evangelization. "We may not always be able to reflect adequately the beauty of the Gospel, but there is one sign which we should never lack: the option for those who are least, those whom society discards," (Evangelii Gaudium 195). "We are called to find Christ in them (the poor), to lend our voice to their causes, but also to be their friends, to listen to them, to speak for them and to embrace the mysterious wisdom which God wishes to share with us through them"(198).

And We?

We cannot finish the year dedicated to Damien without recalling the invitation to be in solidarity with the poor. Many brothers know the interior joy and the personal renewal which direct contact with the smaller ones, with those who suffer more, with those who count less, produces. This contact produces more fruit in the measure that persons affect us more, become important to us, and make us change our style and level of life. From there, the contact leaves off being a "once off," a one way street and comes to convert itself into "solidarity:" journeying together!

There are many journeys. Circumstances vary. However every brother and all the communities can take steps, though modest they be, to increase contact with the poor, to leave oneself to be changed by the poor. Pope Francis reminds us: "No one must say that they cannot be close to the poor because their own lifestyle demands more attention to other areas," (Evangelii Gaudium 201).

Let us continue walking humbly towards the poorest moved by our consecration to the Sacred Hearts of Jesus (who made himself poor for us) and of Mary (the humble servant of the Lord). In them God awaits us since there is "a thirst for God which only the poor and the simple can know," (Evangelii Gaudium 123).

