

The Gift of Solidarity and *Fratelli Tutti*

By Samuel Fuller, OFM Cap.

In August of 2019, during our four-day *New Hampshire Solidarity Walk for Immigrant Justice* from Concord to Dover, each evening we had a presentation or discussion. On the final evening, we learned of the South African greeting and response:

SAWA BONA- SIKHONA

I see you. Because you see me, I am here.

The rich sense of mutuality, identity, and empathy expressed in this exchange was the basis of our discussion that evening. Afterwards, there was the opportunity to take part

walked over to the fence outside the jail.

We wondered if our vigil would have an impact. This had never been tried before, never at this location. Would those who were incarcerated be able to see us or hear us? Would they welcome our witness? Fifty of us held our candles aloft, the clergy shared some prayers and scripture, and we began to sing. Suddenly, a whisper of awe raced through our circle as a rhythmic banging rang out from the walls of the jail. “They hear us!” We continued singing and held our candles higher. Suddenly, “look, they see us! And look, we can see them!”

We stood in communion with our immigrant siblings, awed by their determination to signal to us that they heard, saw, and welcomed our love and witness. Their response was a moving testimony. The power, the bond, and the hope of solidarity was impressed forever on our hearts, as it was on the hearts of those behind the walls of the jail. *Sawa Bona- Sikhona. I see you. Because you see me, I am here.*

This description is based on what was written by Sarah Jane Knoy, Executive Director, Granite State Organizing Project, for their Fall 2019 newsletter.

Solidarity. This is a rich theme of Catholic Social Justice

in a prayer vigil at the nearby Strafford County Jail in Dover, used by Immigration and Custom Enforcement (ICE) to detain immigrants. Once it was dark, those of us who were participating in the vigil left for the short drive. We arrived at the parking lot, piled out of our cars, lit our candles, and

teaching and yet fraught with much misunderstanding. We tend to think that solidarity is identifying with a particular cause through individual acts such as holding up a placard, giving a donation, making a phone call. These are all good but there is also so much more. Or we tend to think of sol-



idity as something other than faith perhaps as being too ‘political’ or public. Saint Pope John Paul II in his encyclical *Sollicitudo rei Socialis* (*On Social Concern, 1987*) succinctly describes solidarity as “a virtue or fruit of interdependence” (#38). This is full of insight and what is offered here is a transformative model of relationship and identity as interdependence presupposes an already ongoing engagement of interconnectedness for the concerns of others. From this sense of community, to then discover solidarity as a fruitfulness is a measure beyond measure, a gift which speaks of the reciprocity of relationships as taking on a life of its own. Pope John Paul II at the conclusion of his encyclical describes the Eucharist as an act of solidarity (#48). Such an insight infinitely expands the capacity of relationship and identity of solidarity with it located in terms of communion with God. Solidarity is revealed as an underlying dynamic of life which can pivot to a specific cause all the while upholding our inherent dignity of being made in the likeness of God.

Pope Francis develops and presents solidarity in his latest encyclical, *Fratelli Tutti* (*On Fraternity and Social Friendship*) as a natural extension of his previous encyclical, *Laudato Si*. Conventional wisdom holds that *Laudato Si* is about climate change yet a reading of it will make it clear that it is about relationship. In this encyclical, he states: We are “called into being by one Father, all of us are linked by unseen bonds and together form a kind of universal family, a sublime communion which fills us with a sacred, affectionate and humble respect” (#89). What Pope Francis does in *Fratelli Tutti* is nothing less than present this brief insight as the basis for an encyclical on universal fraternity. The desire and prayer for the one family of humankind is a dynamic seen throughout history and church documents. The recent US Bishops’ Letter on Racism, *Open Wide Our Hearts* comes to mind. Such desire is taken from the beautiful prayer of Jesus found in John 17:21: “That they may all be one. As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be one in us. . . so that the world may know that you have sent me.” Pope Francis in *Fratelli Tutti* proceeds to fully articulate the nature and meaning of such unity and to present in clear and courageous ways its implications for all aspects of life so that all of humanity is given a sense of belonging, all voices are heard and the fullness of human dignity realized. He does so in challenging yet poetic ways but always in the approachable language of faith, always with a sense of invitation. Solidarity is presented as a natural dimension of our humanity, our relationships, and of our faith. In so doing, out of the fracturing of trust which Pope Francis lays out in unflinching ways in the first chapter of *Fratelli Tutti*, the call is made to rediscover the fundamental nature of solidarity, and to begin the work of renewing our world and society.

The next day, following the candle lit vigil, our Soli-

idity Walk continued as we walked to the small town of Madbury. There we joined the Maranatha Indonesian United Church of Christ faith community who were having a parish picnic complete with a jazz band and field games. This community was integral to the NH Immigrant Solidarity Network early on because of the threat of deportation of many of their members. They had coordinated their parish picnic with our arrival that day to, in effect, send us off on the final stretch to the jail. There were some speeches and then a group photo – seen here. In the photo are concerned citizens, immigrants, and faith leaders mostly from New Hampshire but also from some half a dozen states. To the left in the front row are silhouettes and images of the children who had died at the Mexican border that spring. The four saffron banners were intentionally without writing or symbols and offered an emblematic statement of healing and of human dignity.

Directly after the group photo, we lined up for the last stretch which would conclude our four day walk and bring us to the parking lot of the prison. Once we came within the final two miles, the walk became more intentional and focused. A clear order of procession was established at the front; first the ‘coffins’ of the children who had died at the border, then the faith leaders with some serving as song leaders, and then the saffron banners. When we entered the parking lot of the jail site, the already assembled crowd had formed a corridor thru which we processed to where we laid down the coffins and staged the funeral prayer service to honor the children. The name of each child was proclaimed. The service was solemn and elegiac with prayers, litanies, and song. A few short speeches were given. Then it was announced that we would transition to the nearby circular road which was outside the fence of the jail. Everyone was asked to take a length of saffron cloth not only as a symbol of solidarity but also as a visual sign of our presence for those behind the walls of the jail. It was all very peaceful and orderly. There was chanting as we stretched along the road led by the banners. Then we were silent. We listened and sure enough we could hear the rhythmic banging of hands to walls of those inside signaling that they saw us. Their gratitude became our exhilaration as the bond of solidarity and trust became enfolded. There is something to be said of discovering oneself among hundreds participating in the arc of justice. It is as if one becomes acutely aware of an eternal struggle for human dignity which extends back to the beginnings of human history which now is known in this consecrated present moment yet also serving to be projected into the future with hope and radiance. The experience of such an arc is at once poignant, reverential, expansive, and majestic.

As stated earlier, solidarity is experienced as the virtue of interdependence. This interconnectedness is nothing less than the very fabric of an empowered and enlivened community upholding human dignity. Further, it is community and solidarity together that can embrace and transform injustice

and hold it up for what it is for all to see.

Trust is the key dynamic. Without it there is no relationship. The trust that all of us had formed amongst ourselves working together as the NH Immigrant Solidarity Network had allowed for the release of creative and expansive energies which had made this second walk so powerful. We were able to build on the trust that we had experienced from the solidarity walk of the previous year. This first walk had unfolded beyond our expectations and in hindsight we realized it was because of the trust that we had developed amongst ourselves. Justice is a passionate cause and with our shared conviction and commitment to human dignity, we had drawn closer than we realized after working together for two years; bi-weekly prayer vigils, monthly organizational meetings of several groups all networking together, different group initiatives, prayer services, and gatherings.

Trust can also allow one to be at the receiving end of solidarity. With our first solidarity walk, having walked ten miles on the first day, we returned by car to Manchester (as we had been unable to find a faith community willing to host us) to meet in the upper room of a church to share impressions and to hear stories of three immigrant families. The sharing by these families of the violence that they were subjected to in their home countries was searing in its detail. We, the organizers of the walk, knew the families and the basic parameters of their stories. However, this was something different. We realized that for each of them to revisit such trauma and share with us such pain was a testament to the trust they had with us in the context of our public witness of this walk. It was also a privilege to learn of their courage and perseverance, not to mention their family devotion in the face of such evil. From the depth and the trust of their sharing, the gift of solidarity was given to us who were listening and allowed us to see them in a new way.

Being the administrator for three years of the multi-cultural parish of St. Anne–St. Augustin in Manchester, NH where five languages were spoken and the bulletin was printed in three languages, presented plenty opportunities for the challenging and expansion of one’s identity. We had a plaque in the rectory stating:

The world in which you were born is just one model of reality.
Other cultures are not failed attempts at Being You.
They are unique manifestations of the human spirit.
Edmund Wade Davis, cultural anthropologist

To begin to know the different cultures and to come to respect each one was a lesson in the richness of God’s mercy and the universal Body of Christ. As a Catholic priest, to celebrate the Eucharistic liturgy before such an assembled and diverse Body of Christ was to hold up the infinite richness of the Eucharist. To know the reciprocity of solidarity between

those gathered in church and through the work of the NH Immigrant Solitary Network was a grace upon grace. It was an insight into the Kingdom of God as being seen and known in the eyes, face, and heart of every living being.

Solidarity has infinite ways of being expressed. One person reaching out to meet someone in need can build a community. As an American citizen born in a foreign land and working as a professor in New Hampshire, Mohammad decided that he would throw his support, time, and resourcefulness behind the cause of a parishioner of St. Anne–St. Augustin. He had read about the individual in the paper and decided to help him as if to prove that good can overcome injustice. This man had clearly been racially profiled and thus ensnared in our misguided immigration policies. Knowing the complexities of the case, Mohammad interviewed several lawyers and hand selected an exceptional lawyer from Boston – and then went to work. Over the past three years, he has organized several fundraisers, gathered local support, been written up in the area newspapers, rallied support among different organizations, and been attentive to the man’s situation and legal case throughout. The final resolution remains to be seen, but in the meantime, the man was able to return to his family and to be employed. Mohammad’s tenacity is a testament to his altruism and what one person can do.

In the first chapter of *Fratelli Tutti*, Pope Francis names our current malaise of polarization, superficiality, and misplaced identity. In the second chapter, he presents anew the parable of the Good Samaritan as an example of clear choices and decisions to be made in daily life and as a clear antidote to indifference. Pope Francis takes a parable which all of us seemingly know and reveals with clarifying force its challenge. At the moment of finding the wounded man on the side of the road all distinctions of the three individuals, the Levite, the priest, and the Good Samaritan, disappear. Whatever their status, whatever their background, whatever their religion, all of this disappears before the defining issue of who truly sees the man in his need and bends down to extend help and offer care. Everything else is superfluous. Pope Francis poignantly states the decisive factor- the question is not ‘Who is my neighbor?’ but rather ‘How can I be neighbor to my fellow human being?’

This parable serves as the interpretative key of *Fratelli Tutti* and of a faith of living for others thru encounter and not just for oneself. What is fascinating is how in laying out the basis of solidarity, Pope Francis, ever the pastor and presenter of the tenderness and affection of faith, begins with the nature of the family. He writes:

Families are the first place where the values of love and fraternity, togetherness and sharing, concern and care for others are lived out and handed on...
The values of freedom, mutual respect and solidar-

ity can be handed on from a tender age... (#114).

There is a profound truth here of the interfacing of one's psychology and theological make up and how the healing of one leads to the clarity of the other. Behind it is the nature of generosity and how family dynamics can provide for an initial experience of its wellspring.

Again, expressing the nature of well-being and affection, Pope Francis cites the supportive and generative character of neighborhoods. He writes:

In some areas of our cities, there is still a lively sense of neighbourhood. Each person quite spontaneously perceives a duty to accompany and help his or her neighbour. In places where these community values are maintained, people experience a closeness marked by gratitude, solidarity and reciprocity. The neighbourhood gives them a sense of shared identity (#152).

With this statement, Francis continues to unfold the natural aspect of generosity and solidarity as inherent to our nature and to the fulness of life but now in a more societal setting.

However, lest this all sound sentimental and nostalgic, Pope Francis is very clear of the theological background of his portrayals of family life and beloved communities. As much as he portrays the attributes of respect, affection, and gratitude as basic to human nature which flourish in an atmosphere of generosity they also provide the basis for a deepening and expanding through conversion. Prefacing his above comment of families, he defines solidarity as a "moral virtue and social attitude born of personal conversion..." (#114). He even devotes a section (#222-224) to kindness and cites St. Paul who describes kindness as a gift of the Holy Spirit. As an antidote to "consumerist individualism," which can easily lead to viewing the other as an obstacle and an attitude of 'every man for himself,' kindness frees us from such anxiety and feverish activity and as a sign of respect for others serves "to transform lifestyles, relationships and the ways ideas are discussed and compared." What is extraordinary here is how Pope Francis paints an overarching vision with the seemingly smallest of brush strokes. He writes of how a kind person through gestures of the gift of a smile, a word of encouragement, or the availability to listen "can create a healthy social atmosphere in which misunderstandings can be overcome and conflict forestalled." He is very forthright in stating that kindness is "no superficial bourgeois virtue."

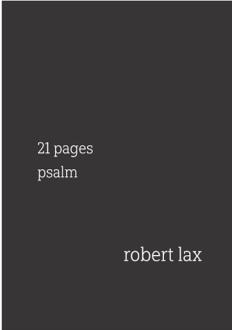
Pope Francis proceeds to build the building blocks of solidarity with the value of charity. In chapter 5, he calls for a "social and political charity" (#176-#185) as an extension of the goodness of human nature and of faith from the private sphere into the public. Yet this sense of politics is

not of the powerful and wealthy but is directly grounded in community organizations working directly with people and their needs whereby their stories are shared, and their voices are heard. This principal of subsidiarity is integral to that of solidarity whereby policies and programs are developed not for the poor but with the poor. Here we see Pope Francis' spirit of personal accompaniment extending to social concerns and the body politic. Always mindful of personal and family relationships, he likens this sense of a social compact to "solidity" (#115) and that is only with such societal and legal protection can families flourish, and 'the warmth of the domestic hearth' (#164) be maintained.

As if the dynamic of solidarity, developed in the majestic vision of *Fratelli Tutti* from the concepts of family and neighborhood relationships, to that of the public sphere through the concepts of subsidiarity and solidity, inherently points to a tangible physicality, Pope Francis offers the visual image of a polyhedron.



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