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Responses and Reviews: Response to Hollenbach (Conversations, no.13)

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RESPONSES AND REVIEWS

Response to Hollenbach (Conversations, *Spring 1998)*

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In the Spring 1998 issue of *Conversations on Jesuit Higher Education*, David Hollenbach, S.J., argues the need of attention to the common good as contrasted with "individualistic presuppositions" ("Is Tolerance Enough? The Catholic University and the Common Good," 5-6). He cites the biblical notion of a covenant of a *group* of human beings with God. And he cites ancient Greek tradition in "Aristotle's understanding that the human being is a social or political animal" (9). He also cites (10, 11-15) the recent emphasis on the concept of "solidarity," attended to particularly by Pope John Paul II and by many others of late.

This issue of *Conversations* makes it clear that in earlier preindustrial societies human persons normally felt themselves not as isolated individuals but as belonging to one or another group or groups. But this issue also conveys the impression that things have been much worse in recent years than they used to be. We hear of "the stronger community described by Aristotle as the *polis*, or by Cicero as the *res publica*," and the statement that in them "people are truly interdependent on each other" (7).

However, while it is true that in earlier preindustrial societies individuals felt themselves not as isolated individuals but as belonging to one or another group or groups, this does not mean that they were totally incorporated into the society around them in ways that would be livable today. Let us take those living in Aristotle's *polis*. This was almost unimaginably different from what we conceive a city to be. First of all, in the *polis* there were few free citizens. Most of its denizens were slaves—and this state of affairs was taken to be natural and inevitable. The slave would have felt himself or herself as part of the *polis*, but not in a necessarily human way livable today.

It is significant that most persons in the *polis* were illiterate and did not ambition literacy, which now holds together so much in human life across the world. Until paper came to the West from East Asia toward the end of the Middle Ages, writing was a laborious task. The cultures were miles away not only from computers but even from pens and ink used with paper. Typically, writing called for parchment (specially prepared animal skins, clumsy to handle and to store) or cumbersome tablets of wax melted into wooden frames. On parchment, one used pens made from heavy goose quills which had to be sharpened over and over again with a small knife whose successor today we still anachronistically call a "pen knife." For the wax on wooden tablets, one used a stylus to scrape the letters into the wax surface, taking care that the scraping was done vigorously enough that the text could actually be read. All this was too much for busy people. If you wanted something written, you normally found a slave or other professional to write it, perhaps adding to some documents toward the end a few words in your own hand, very likely much less legible than that of the professional scribe. Readers of the Bible will remember that Paul does this in several of his letters, for example, at the end of *II Thessalonians*, tacking on a few words in his own hand to what the scribe has written in his own professionally executed text: "This greeting is in my own hand, Paul's. This is the sign in every letter; this is how I write." The ancient world was eons from the World Wide Web. Aristotle's *polis* or St. Paul's was not held together by paper—there wasn't any paper in the *polis*, or anywhere else, in antiquity.

Intertextuality—the conscious or unconscious presence in a given text of awarenesses found in other texts in the same culture—has been a part of human culture since antiquity: Aristotle and other ancient Greeks quote Homer and the poets. But while intertextuality is not new, the Internet and World Wide Web have moved the simpler intertextuality of the past into ordinary living with an immediacy that we are only beginning to understand.

Aristotle could have had a feeling of being linked to other human beings by oratory and rhetoric, but he had no feeling for the intensely intertextual world in which our existence is framed. Neither did he have a

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feeling for a world linked by hundreds of thousands of miles of superhighways, not to mention hundreds of thousands of telephones and electronic communication dishes. This is to say that he could have had no awareness of how today's human beings are present to each others' consciousnesses, day and night, on call.

Antiquity did not, could not, have our sense of human presence in the universe—not simply on our globe, with its some six billion human beings, but as part of God's incredibly huge creation, brought into being not as a quiescent mass later set in motion, but as evolving from the beginning (evolution in time has been constituent of creation, part of the universe, from the first instant of its existence). This creation has laid hold of itself in human consciousness and human intersubjectivity with a deep power that we are only recently beginning to understand. We can hardly expect guidance from Aristotle in what we have learned only lately of this creation of God's.

A conceptual apparatus that has developed to enable us to lay hold of our present human entry into the vastness of God's creation around us and of our always growing intersubjectivity or intimate awareness of the presence of all human beings to each other, is certainly, as Father Hollenbach suggests, the concept of "solidarity," much touted (but not invented) by Pope John Paul II and espoused by thousands of others. Hollenbach would list "solidarity" in the same series with the old virtues of prudence, justice, temperance, and fortitude. I am not sure that it is at all the same sort of thing. It appears to transcend such "virtues." What it comes to is a circumstantial awareness that in our world, more than ever before, increasingly everything is related to everything else, and more and more explicitly in our awareness as human consciousness evolves.

Solidarity has grown and will grow as human consciousness grows. It will not automatically solve all problems, but it will be a part of attempts at solutions. It is up to us to discover what to do with what we know and will come to know. In response to the title of Hollenbach's article, there is no doubt that tolerance is not enough. But we must roll up our sleeves. Finding what is enough, what to add to tolerance and how, cannot be managed easily. Perhaps Aristotle cannot be of much help—although this very thought may be a blow to some.

What all this adds up to is the conclusion that, while we need to be aware of the past, which is part of us, we also need to conceive of present problems in terms of the present and future into which we are heading. The challenge to the Church—and to human beings generally—is how to face the future in the light of the past and the present. Surely, we need more than tolerance, much more, and we need it in the real world that we know. We have to work to establish real perspectives in a real cosmology and in realistic, fundamental, cultural and theological studies, in accord with what we know of a universe which, from the moment of its creation some fifteen billion years ago, has been actively, often riotously, evolving in accord with God's manifest plan.

Even deconstruction can help. Many see deconstruction as simply destroying all coherent thought and all values. Yet one way of describing the message of deconstruction is that nothing you can put into words will give you the final answer to everything: you cannot *verbally* make ultimate sense. The Bible gives us this message in *Qoheleth*: all is vanity, and nothing that can be said will eliminate the ubiquitous vanity. Not long ago I saw a fatuous commentary on *Qoheleth* produced a generation ago, which explained that *Qoheleth* came from an early stage of revelation, before the Hebrews had fully worked out how to explain verbally the problem of evil, *as they later did*! But there is no *explanation* for the "problem of evil." There is only a response in love: God's response, when the Son of God enters into the created world and lets evil spill over him. The *response* is not a set of words. It is simply love and the cross.