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A catholic view of the ethic principle of solidarity. Consequences at the ethic-social level

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Abstract

It is well known that founding documents of the EU do not contain any objective reference to the cultural-Christian tradition of the ‘old world’ – in spite of the sustained efforts of several Christian churches from Europe, peculiarly the Catholic one (through the Pope John Paul II himself). In an European society characterized more and more by discriminations and prejudices, superficiality and abusers, the necessity appears to recover the knowledge and awareness of fundamental ethic-social principles like *personalism*, *solidarity* and *subsidiarity*. The present article put forward a qualified differentiation of the ‘term’ solidarity, followed by bringing into question some types of solidarity, as for instance those of the ethic-social, ethic-individual and legal-juridical areas. Debates go on from the points of view of the delicate balance between individual welfare and collective welfare, the moral-social responsibility of social actors, the human dignity, our social (in) competence as well as the time-space dimension. Conclusions suggest considering the social implications of solidarity principle within social-charitative area.

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Motto: “The Christian interpretation of solidarity is perhaps unusual but not unreasonable [...]. An asymmetrical economy of solidarity does not have to preclude prudent acting. Solidarity and social justice are not mutually exclusive: they complement each other. This is why, in making agreements with debtor nations, debt reduction or debt forgiveness should always be linked to verifiable investment in basic health care and education, and to programs that promote citizens’ participation.”[†]

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[†] Verstraeten, Johan, *Debt Forgiveness, Social Justice and Solidarity*, in: *Ethical Perspectives - Journal of the European Ethics Network*, Nr. 6, 2001, p. 25.

1. Introduction

The human history is far distant from a constant search for the realization of what we nowadays use to call social justice, solidarity and communion. But for the Christian thoughts things are different: in the Christian ethical thoughts personality, subsidiarity, solidarity and social justice, the right to use earthly goods are considered key concepts.

Even if the term solidarity occupies a special place in the social ethic thought, let keep in mind that it has a secular root and it is a relative recent term. In fact solidarity was introduced as a response to industrialization and the division of labour. The process of labour created a specific togetherness (solidarity) among people who participated with various capacities in the labour process. Émile Durkheim[‡] was the one who has distinguished between:

- *solidarité mécanique* (a kind an unity based on equality), and
- *solidarité organique* (a unity on diversity, like in the case of modern societies – the division of labour).

We can see that the solidarity term acquired the ethical connotation of belonging together: in the last resort, the assistance of helpless individuals remains a moral duty. It becomes clearly enough that nowadays solidarity has a particular significance in our context of interdependence and globalization.

2. Meanings of the term solidarity

According to the catholic interpretation of solidarity, we can make a distinction between three meanings of solidarity: *the sociological, the ethical and the Christian one*.

1. The *sociological* term implies the process of socialization itself regarding a very complex interdependence among people, nations and continents – a process that is further reinforced by the process of globalization.
2. But the solidarity concept also responds to an *ethical* answer to national, continental (European, too) and global situations. We understand here not a vague compassion (or simple empathy) with the sufferings but to a determination to commit to the common good. In the catholic point of view interdependence must be transformed in solidarity, based upon the principle that the goods of creation are meant for all (health care, education, work opportunities, suitable recreation etc.).
3. The specifically *Christian term of solidarity* cannot be detached from the preceding two: it gives radical theological depth to the ethical dimension. In this sense solidarity as a Christian virtue assume the specifically dimension of selflessness, forgiveness and reconciliation: with respect to the concrete needs of the poor, this means that it is not enough to donate what is superfluous: who lives in solidarity with the must also donate what is real necessary. More than that, the universal right to use earthly goods indicates here good reasons for considerably reducing or even forgiving some debt burden: it reaffirms the logic of social justice. Human and Christian solidarity are not two different categories, but they complement each other.

Ethical solidarity is necessary, especially in these turbulent violent times (not so far from Europe) but it can receives its full historical actualization only if it becomes a Christian radicality. “This choice of a radical form of solidarity also goes together with a societal model that is at least as reasonable and dynamic as the liberal tradition’s atomistic society.”[§] From this awareness comes the Church preference for the poor.

Analyzing the german psychologist Dieter Fuchs’s reflections about solidarity we must also meditate about some ‘indicators’ of solidarity – equality, dignity, democratic and symmetrical relationships:

[‡] Verstraeten, Johan, *Debt Forgiveness, Social Justice and Solidarity*, in: Ethical Perspectives - Journal of the European Ethics Network, Nr. 6, 2001, p. 21.

[§] Verstraeten, Johan, *Debt Forgiveness, Social Justice and Solidarity*, in: Ethical Perspectives - Journal of the European Ethics Network, Nr. 6, 2001, p. 23.

“Gemeinsame Merkmale für Solidarität sind: Anerkennung von Gleichheit und der Würde des Menschen, demokratische Verhältnisse und symmetrische Verbundenheit. [...] Das Einfordern von Rechten mit Sicht auf traditionelle Unterschiede mit Merkmalen wie Stämme, Religionen, Rassen, Gebräuchen pervertieren den Begriff der Solidarität.”** [...] Solidarität ist ein Schlüsselbegriff für verschiedene Dimensionen. Die Sozialdimension beschreibt die Sinngebung, die Zeitdimension den Historischen Weg, die Sachdimension wirtschaftliche Aspekte in Verbindung mit dem Sozialen. Im Folgenden wird von der Sozial- und Zeitdimension ausgegangen.“

The author develops then the key concept of solidarity writing about other dimensions like: the meaning dimension; the temporary aspects of solidarity in various contexts; the socio-economical situations when solidarity relationships are taking place or not.

3. ‘Positive’ solidarity and ‘negative’ solidarity

After a briefly analysis of our human societies (European too, of course), it seems that solidarity is like a coin with two faces: a positive one and a negative one:

3.1. Positive solidarity

The governments, the social structures, the NGO’s, churches etc. must create the social conditions where actual social participation of all citizens can be realized. In this sense the personalist values of solidarity and integrity are need to be implemented in the social mechanisms of managements methods (in finding voluntaries, in motivating them, in directing their loyalty, ideas, ideals and energies).

According to the Christian point of view, the respect for any kind of contract must be always subordinate to respect for life and for the quality of life (commutative justice.) In *Centesimus Annus* (CA) the Pope John Paul II wrote down:

“It is a strict duty of justice and truth not to allow fundamental human needs to remain unsatisfied, and not to allow those burdened by such needs to perish. [...] It cannot be expected that the debts which have been contracted should be paid at the price of unbearable sacrifices.”†† Of course that, on further reflection social justice implies solidarity (and debt forgiveness).

3.2. Negative solidarity

In our eastern European the realities within the last 16 years we have experienced dangerous forms of corruptions like:

1. Private gains that often are placed above public gains;
2. Different kinds of abuses;
3. Group interests that are placed above public interests.

In fact this negative solidarity arises when solidarity at a wide level is replaced with a ‘narrow’ solidarity (some real clans, hermetic and exclusive groups and networks based on purely private interests.)

In consequence the actual political ‘transparency’ is a pathological one because it serves mostly those who govern. In Romania these examples can be endless. Transparency should not be only connected to social and economical mechanisms in order to improve only management activities, but transparency has to be understood as a condition to a healthy democracy. (Of course we should not see transparency as supreme ethical values in itself but as a mean for protecting values. There are certain limits to transparency - the right to privacy for example).

** Fuchs, Dieter, *Konzepte der Solidarität*, Echter Verlag, Würzburg, 1996, p. 51.

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4. 'Moral' person and 'legal' person: are they linked by solidarity?

The world we are living it seems characterized by a cruel paradox: on one hand, we are interested in the life of every human being, no matter how humble his/her social status is. (The mass media is very active in focusing individuals who are stricken by the misery of the war, hunger, injustice, violence etc.) On the other hand, on other cases human life seems to be of no value at all: so often, even when there are advertisements telling us that it costs only some euros to rescue one person from some horrible disease, our gifts and donation to the humanitarian aid organization remain so limited. Speaking about our beloved and old Europe, let us not forget that we have built the fortress of Europe to defend our frontiers against the thousands of potentially millions refugees who hope for a better life. We know very well also that people are dying every day because of failed attempts at illegal border crossings. "If we have the power to save human life by inviting strangers to participate in our legal communities, we do not act; if we do not have the power to save human life because we are overwhelmed by the might of nature and fate, we deeply regret our failing."^{‡‡}

For philosophers, the above presented conflicts can be reformulated as the *contradiction between the moral and the legal person*. As a moral person the individual has an absolute value: its value is unconditional. But as a legal person the individual has no absolute value, because the membership of a legal community is in fact unconditional. From these two perspectives it remains very important to realize that:

1. in fact the conditions of the legal community contradict the absoluteness of the moral person;
2. to put the absoluteness of the moral person above the exclusiveness of the legal community leads to totalitarianism – in Romania as in other eastern European people have recently experienced this horrible period of time;
3. human freedom of the individuals in one society is dependent of the existence the legal system. If the legal system collapses, the individual do not have the power to restore their own freedom. Consequently they are ruined as free and equal persons.

As a consequence, without legal community, no real life can exist, and without real life no real existence of the moral person.

5. Contract vs. covenant

Taking into consideration the Thomas Aquinas' view:

- the personal dignity - rooted in her own theological perspective - surpasses any social level;
- in the same time, the individual interests must never run counter to the general welfare, according to idea that the individual must be seen as parts of the social whole.

Respecting the Thomas Aquinas ideas there is a clear parallel between the general welfare and the universal right to use goods (*usus communis rerum*): a right which can takes priority over property. More clearly, according to the catholic view: "the universal right to use goods is just as primordial for the relations between persons and goods as the general welfare is for politics as a whole."^{§§}

We live now in the period where with the modernity increasing of secularization the universal right to use common goods almost disappeared. Henceforth the communities 'are symbolized by the metaphor' of the contract (not by the covenant^{***} anymore). As a logical consequence the relationships with the needed persons ant the poor people is not solidarity, but rather a contractual relationship mediated by political and economical entities, which are in fact property claims over financial resources. This means that in a contractual reality the relations among objects take priority over the quality of relations among persons.

^{‡‡} Cobben, Paul, *Cosmopolitan or totalitarianism. Reflections on hospitality without boundaries*, in: *Ethical Perspectives - Journal of the European Ethics Network*, Nr. 4, 2005, p. 466.

^{§§} Verstraeten, Johan, *Debt forgiveness, Social Justice and Solidarity*, in: *Ethical Perspectives - Journal of the European Ethics Network*, Nr. 6, 2001, p. 23.

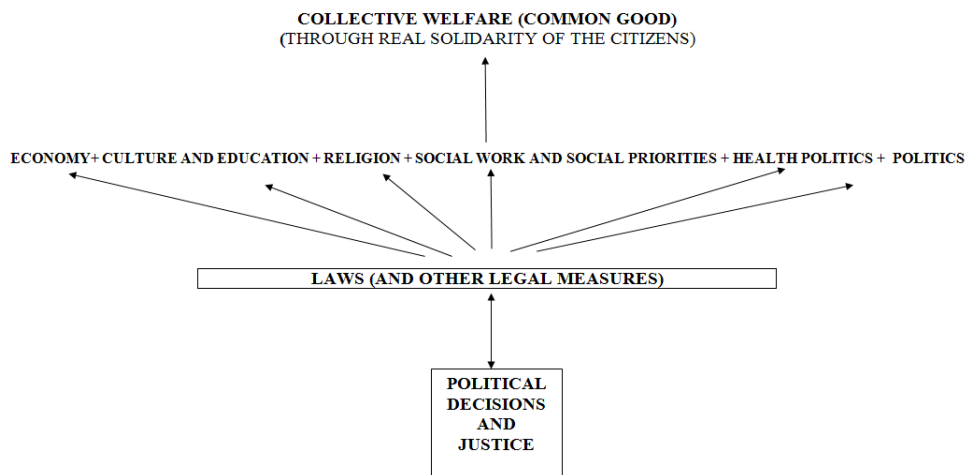
^{***} According bto the covenant metaphor in the christian thoughts the ,haves' are expected to contribute to the welfare of the ,have nots', which is not the case of the contractual relationships.

6. Implications for the social work

We have to realize that often some old receipts of solidarity of many new networks cannot be put in practice any longer. The social work organizations are based not only of the principle of solidarity of their own employees and voluntary people. In their active dynamic these institutions, organizations and foundations are taking into account the balance between the ethical principles of personality, solidarity, subsidiarity and responsibility. In the social work activities these ethical priorities use often to take the form of empowerment and self-help. Let us not forget that solidarity can be effectively learned: that means also that solidarity can be effective only through dialog and other communication's skills.

7. Conclusion

If we like to schematize the above discussions taking into discussion the real power of the state itself in empowering and maintaining solidarity among citizens, let us take a brief look at this scheme:



Graph 1: the relations between the state and different levels of civil society

We should not forget that:

“Europe has always been the continent of doubt and questioning, seeking humanism appropriate to its time, the cradle of ideas which ultimately encircle the globe. The time has come to return to ideals, o let them penetrate our lives. Let us continue to consider, in everything we do in the field of politics, economics and social and cultural life, what will enable every man and every woman to achieve their full potential in awareness not only of their rights but also of their obligations to others and to society as a whole.”[...]I find myself dreaming of a Europe which has thrown off the chains of Yalta , a Europe which trends its immense cultural heritage so that it bears fruit, a Europe which imprints the mark of solidarity on a world which is far too hard and too forgetful of its underdeveloped regions. If we can achieve this Europe we will be able to stretch ourselves to the utmost; and we will have all the space we need to achieve our full potential. It will bring us back to our philosophical and cultural roots, to the perennial values of Europe.”^{†††}

^{†††} Delors, Jacques, *European Personalist Perspectives*, in: *Ethical Perspectives - Journal of the European Ethics Network*, Nr. 8, 1999, p. 82.

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