

Regional Solidarity: What is it and how do we do it?

The following is an excerpt from “Option for the Poor and the Journey to Regional Solidarity,” by Bro. Raymond L. Fitz, S.M., Ph.D.

Regional Solidarity

The virtue of solidarity helps understand how the Church can exercise an option for the poor in the context of our metropolitan regions. Solidarity is a communitarian principle and virtue developed in the Catholic social tradition over the last fifty years in response to the growing interdependence and complexity of society. It has integrated traditional concepts of justice, compassion and other social virtues to address major injustices that exist in society. As a moral virtue, solidarity 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 responsible for all.” (SRS 39) Solidarity applies to not only our relationships that are close, such as our extended family and neighborhood, but all relations with our neighbors that are at a distance.

From the Compendium of Social Doctrine, we realize that the virtue of solidarity urges persons and groups to overcome the structures of sins that dominate relationships between individuals and peoples in our metropolitan regions. These structures “must be purified and transformed into structures of solidarity through the creation or appropriate modification of laws, market regulations, and juridical systems.” (CSD, 193).

Regional solidarity has three key elements:¹

- The recognition of the interdependence of people in diverse neighborhoods of the region and regional institutions and their responsibility to all in the region, especially the poor.
- A firm commitment to the common good of the region, which requires transforming regional structures so they promote the participation and rights of all.
- A willingness to work with others across boundaries of class, race, ethnicity, religion, and organizational boundaries to foster an inclusive common good.

In a talk to leaders of Labor Unions in Chicago, Cardinal Cupich outlined what he called the Church’s consistent ethic of solidarity. A consistent ethic of regional solidarity “aims at making sure no one, from the first moment of life to natural death, from the wealthiest community to our poorest neighborhoods, is excluded from the table of life”. By analogy, regional solidarity as a virtue is the firm and persevering determination by persons and groups advancing the common good of the metropolitan region. A consistent ethic of life applied to a metropolitan region aims to create a table of life in the region where no one, from the first moment of life to natural death, from the wealthiest neighborhood to our poorest neighborhood is excluded.

There are two necessary conditions for creating this regional table of life. First, the regional community must have the capacity to transform the structures of poverty and racism that influence the silent violence of poverty. Second, it must be able to create new structures and processes where those suffering the silent violence of poverty develop the capacity to become artisans of their future and the future of the metropolitan region.

¹ These three elements are suggested by Gerald J. Beyer, “Solidarity by Grace, Nature or Both? The Possibility of Human Solidarity in the Light of Evolutionary Biology and Catholic Theology”, *The Heythrop Journal*, 2013, p 733.

Regional Solidarity and “The Option for the Poor”

In the first conversation with journalists the day after his election, Pope Francis stated that he wanted “a poor Church for the poor”. Over the past five years, he has consistently stressed this message. In an address at the Patriarchal Church of St. George in Istanbul, Turkey, he said:

In today’s world, voices are being raised which we cannot ignore, and which implore our Churches to live deeply our identity as disciples of the Lord Jesus Christ.

The first of these voices is that of the poor. In the world, there are too many women and men who suffer from severe malnutrition, growing unemployment, a rising number of unemployed youths, and from increasing social exclusion. These can give rise to criminal activity and even the recruitment of terrorists. We cannot remain indifferent before the cries of our brothers and sisters. These ask of us not only material assistance – needed in so many circumstances – but above all, our help to defend their dignity as human persons, so that they can find the spiritual energy to become once again protagonists in their own lives. They ask us to fight, in light of the Gospel, the structural causes of poverty: inequality, the shortage of dignified work and housing, and the denial of their rights as members of society and as workers. As Christians we are called together to eliminate that globalization of indifference which today seems to reign supreme, while building a new civilization of love and solidarity.²

Using the phrase “option for the poor” in conversations within the Church and within the greater regional community requires some nuance. The “option for the poor” in Catholic social thought originated with liberation theologians reflecting on the dramatic economic inequality of the many South American countries. Our social analysis illustrated because of the silent violence of poverty, those that are poor are those without resources and opportunities for education, opportunities for work, and human fulfillment. This analysis also indicated that different neighborhoods in the region have different attitudes and perceptions of the poor and their reasons for being poor. An ethic of solidarity clearly indicates that our attitude toward the poor must have the following characteristics:

- Respect for human dignity – the poor are due respect as persons having the ability to be artisans of their future. As such, the poor are persons capable of growth and development in acting as agents with the capability of entering into mutual and reciprocal relationships for social change.
- Including the Voices of the Poor: In planning for social change to address the injustice of poverty and racism, it is important that persons suffering the silent violence of poverty have a voice.
- Capacity for Participation: Those suffering the silent violence of poverty must participate in framing the issues for change and in implementing the programs of change.

Justice for the poor requires an intimate knowledge of the contexts and circumstances that shape poverty. Theologically, these can be understood through the perspective of structural sin. Structural sin manifests itself in policies, laws, and social practices that fail to respect or enhance the dignity of certain groups in society. One example of this is redlining. Beginning in the 1930s, the government-sponsored Home Owners’ Loan Corporation and the Federal Home Loan Bank Board used maps to rank the financial risk of investment in particular areas. Areas considered too risky to receive federally insured mortgages were marked in red. Any neighborhood in which African Americans resided was automatically classes as “hazardous” for investment. This has had long-lasting and disastrous impacts on these neighborhoods and on rates of African American homeownership.

² Address of Pope Francis at the Patriarchal Church of St. George, Istanbul, Turkey
http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/homilies/2014/documents/papa-francesco_20141130_divina-liturgiaturchi.html.

To address structural sin, we first need personal conversion to the virtue of solidarity and we need to organize groups and associations that can bring about the necessary social transformation to overturn structural sin.

Journey to Regional Solidarity?

This section moves to the concrete strategies for undertaking the journey to regional solidarity. First, the concept of constructive conversations is outlined and two types of constructive conversations that are helpful for the journey to regional solidarity are identified. Second, strategies for undertaking the journey to regional solidarity are outlined.

Constructive Conversations³

In our work to create conditions of regional solidarity, we have used the guiding ideas of “constructive conversations” and “the virtues of constructive conversations.”

A constructive conversation involves a group of persons constructively exchanging views on a focus question that is important to the group. Examples of the focused question might be “What is our experience of racism in our community?” or “What is the cause of youth violence in our neighborhood?” Often these questions are very difficult and complex; the persons involved in the conversation have very different perspectives on the question; and often the question evokes strong emotions. For the conversation to be constructive there must be a structure that opens the conversation with a period of dialogue followed by a period of deliberation. In the period of dialogue, the group opens up perspectives on the focus question, examines facts, explores meaning and promotes understanding. In the period of deliberation, the group narrows down the possible answers to the question and decides on an answer or important elements of an answer. In a good constructive conversation, someone documents the key outcomes of the conversation.

1.) Virtues of Constructive Conversations: Over time, we have developed a set of approaches necessary to commit to constructive conversations:

A Culture of Encounter: I will create opportunities for conversations on important questions that shape our society with persons, who not only share my perspectives, but also with people who hold different perspectives. In these encounters, I will respect the dignity of each person in the conversation.

Respectful Inquiry: I will listen carefully and thoughtfully to arguments that are different from mine. I will suspend my judgment temporarily in an effort to understand the experiences, perspectives and logic of the others’ arguments. I will ask questions that help me empathically understand their experiences, perspectives and logic. I will endeavor to understand their arguments before I argue against them.

Honest Advocacy: I will endeavor to grasp the issues involved in the question under consideration. I will make arguments based on my experience and perspectives and formulate arguments in a logically coherent manner. I will invite others to test my arguments and the experiences and/or the facts contained in my arguments. I will realize that others have different experiences and perspectives on the question, and I will endeavor to respect and incorporate as much as possible their experiences and perspectives in my arguments.

Openness to Learning: I engage in conversations with others so that we together can enrich our personal and shared experiences, perspectives, and insights into the truth and the common good.

³ Our ideas on constructive conversation are an adaptation of the work of Peter Senge, *The Fifth Discipline: The Art and Practice of the Learning Organization* (Doubleday, New York, 1994), pp 174-204.

Intellectual Humility: I will always consider the possibility that my arguments may be deficient or wrong. When I come to the realization that my arguments are deficient or wrong, I will readily acknowledge it.

Prophetic Courage: When called for, I will speak clearly and forcefully for positions that I believe to be just and true, but that may be unpopular or even reviled. In these situations, I will persist in speaking for my position even when mine is a minority voice and there is a price to pay.

Practical Wisdom: I will work to develop the wisdom to know how to apply these virtues and habits in different situations. I will participate in public conversations in a way that ultimately contributes to the common good of my communities.

Growth in these virtues and habits requires thoughtful practice and then critical reflection on how I can improve my practice of them.

2.) Different Types of Constructive Conversations

In the journey to regional solidarity, we have found two types of constructive conversation particularly helpful.

Constructive Conversations of Friendship: This conversation brings together people from different neighborhoods of the Fractured City and creates a structure where they can share their different stories and experiences with the intent of developing a friendship. For example, a conversation of friendship could bring together participants from white suburbs and from distressed neighborhoods of color. The conversation can be structured by the question, “What has been your experience of racism in our regional community?” While it seems like a simple question, our experience is that it can often produce strong emotions in the participants. We have found it helpful to introduce this type of conversation with a short presentation on the virtues of constructive conversation.

Conversations of friendship can be organized in a variety of ways. For example, the closing of the only Catholic hospital in the city that left a vacuum of service in African American neighborhoods. A group with representatives of religious communities and personnel from Catholic agencies in the city want to mobilize a constructive response. It was clear that these Catholic agencies were conducting some very good services in these neighborhoods. Yet, the group thought something more was needed. To start an exploration, the group met with teachers at one Catholic school in the neighborhood, and parents, to explore what services were needed and how these services could be more effectively delivered. This conversation allowed a rich sharing of experiences and stories and led to formulating a direction for moving forward. The friendships became a basis of trust and a commitment to work together.

Constructive Conversation for Action: Once people have developed a friendship with each other, they are in a position to enter into Constructive Conversations for Action. Constructive Conversations for Action aimed at transforming structures of the sin of poverty and racism into structures of solidarity that promote justice and reconciliation. Undertaking this transformation of structures constitutes an adaptive challenge. An adaptive challenge, like the transformation of structures, requires new learning and innovation by the participants as they frame the problem to be addressed and to invent appropriate solutions. Technical or expert knowledge alone is not sufficient to transform structures.

Constructive conversations that aim at action to transform structures requires:

- **Addressing Complexity** – requires a system perspective because there are many interacting factors and actors that have created the structures of sin.
- **Bring a Diversity of Perspectives to the Table** – there are competing underlying values that often require tough choices and trade-offs. People in the different neighborhoods see the issues differently, and often when talking about changing structures emotions run high.

- **Developing Ownership of the Problem and the Solutions** – in order to implement changes, there has to be ownership of the problem and the solutions by the key stakeholders.
- **Engaging in a Sequence of Constructive Conversation** – Key stakeholders must be engaged in a sequence of conversations in which they frame the adaptive challenge, create and deliberate on solutions, implement the chosen solution, and evaluate change and learn. The conversations require the participants to engage in creative thinking and innovation. Constructive conversations enable the application of collective wisdom and sound judgment.

In Constructive Conversation for Action, we have found it helpful to take participants in the conversation through questions of four phases of Catholic social practice⁴:

- **SEE** – How do we frame the adaptive challenge of injustice we wish to address?
- **JUDGE** – What solutions can we create to the adaptive challenge and how do we deliberate to choose the appropriate solution?
- **ACT** – How do we organize people and mobilize resources to implement our solution?
- **REFLECT** – How do we evaluate the changes that took place and what have we learned?

A case study of a Conversation of Action, *Breaking the Cycle of Poverty* can be found on the Fr. Ferree Professor of Social Justice Website at the University of Dayton.⁵

A Church that is a Catalyst and Partners in the Journey to Regional Solidarity

I conclude these reflections by briefly outlining six strategies for the journey to regional solidarity. The United States Conference of Catholic Bishops have offered pastoral reflections on overcoming the social sin of poverty (*A Place at the Table, 2002*) and the social sin of racism (*Open Wide Our Hearts, 2018*). The Conference has also developed an excellent set of resources to supplement these pastoral reflections.⁶ *A Place at the Table* issues the following challenge. “In the Catholic tradition, concern for the poor is advanced by individual and common action, works of charity, efforts to achieve a more just social order, the practice of virtue, and the pursuit of justice in our own lives. It requires action to confront structures of injustice that leave people poor. *Open Wide Our Hearts* contains the challenge “Racism can only end if we contend with the policies and institutional barriers that perpetuated and preserved the inequality – economic and social – that we still see all around us.” What is required now is for the Church of the metropolitan regions to develop and implement a comprehensive strategy that will enable it to be a catalyst and partner in overcoming the social sins of poverty and racism. The regional Catholic Church needs to undertake the journey to regional solidarity.

1. Develop a spirituality of solidarity and an appreciation of the social sin of poverty and racism in our metropolitan regions.

Structural change required to overcome the social sins of racism and poverty requires a group of persons deeply imbued with spirituality of solidarity. This requires a concerted effort to preach on the personal responsibility for solidarity, to integrate the Bishops’ resources into a parish religious education and adult formation programs. These resources should be integrated into the curriculum of our Catholic Schools and Universities. The programs must not only conduct social analysis of the injustice of poverty and race in a given metropolitan region but must engage people in the experience and stories of people experiencing the injustice of poverty and racism. These experiences and stories can touch the hearts of Catholics and bring them to a conversion of heart by allowing them to examine their implicit bias to people in poverty and to people of color as well as their contributions to social sins of poverty and racism.

⁴ Appendix A provides a more detailed set of questions.

⁵ <https://udayton.edu/directory/artssciences/fitzcenter/images/fitz-ray-files/breaking-cycle-poverty-fitz.pdf>

⁶ These resources are available at <http://www.usccb.org/>.

2. Rebuild or Sustain a Catholic Urban Presence in One or More Disadvantaged Neighborhood of the metropolitan region.

One important element in the Church's effort to combat systemic poverty would be the rebuilding or sustaining a Catholic presence in one or more disadvantaged neighborhoods, especially in neighborhoods with a high percentage of people of color. This Catholic presence could serve one or more of the following purposes:

- To provide children with an education pathway that could include early child-care, quality early learning and excellent primary education;
- To provide parents with the knowledge and skills needed to build strong families, support their children's learning, develop economic self-sufficiency.
- To partner with people of the neighborhood in organizing the assets of their neighborhood and developing programs that will improve the quality of life;
- To provide an evangelizing outreach in the neighborhood; and
- To provide the experience of hospitality and dialogue for members of the regional Church to share experiences and stories.

3. Bridge and Heal the Fractured Regional Church.

Our metropolitan region is fractured and often our regional Catholic Church is also fractured. Pew Research illustrates that the Catholic Church nearly mirrors the fractured nature of our larger society. There is a major gap between the experience and assumptions of Catholics in the suburbs and the experience and assumptions of Catholics and others in disadvantaged neighborhoods. The regional Church has made some efforts to bridge and heal these fractures. For example, there has been the twinning of parishes within metropolitan regions. In my judgment, a more comprehensive effort is required.

The Catholic urban presence, outlined above, can be a site to host opportunities for conversations among people of the different neighborhoods in which they share personal experiences and stories. Out of these conversations, friendships can grow, providing a starting point for healing, reconciliation, and common action. Creating spaces for encounter and dialogue where people of diverse experiences can come together is critical for healing the injustice of poverty and race within the metropolitan region.

4. Create and Participate in Forums of Public Deliberations on the Common Good.

To be a catalyst and partner in addressing the injustice of poverty and racism requires that Catholics participate in public deliberations on the common good with knowledge, civility and compassion. Public discourse in our country is often highly polarized and this discourse cannot create a consensus on a way to enhance the common good. Parishes and regional offices of Catholic social action and Catholic Charities should develop educational programs that help Catholics develop the skills to participate in public deliberation in a way that creates greater consensus across differences. These educational programs must incorporate the best practice skills of hosting and facilitating encounters and dialogue with the insights of our Catholic social tradition.

The Catholic Church, along with other faith communities, can create spaces for encounter and dialogue. In these spaces, the hard work of understanding the injustice of poverty and racism within the region can be done, creatively imagining a new future of greater economic and racial justice, designing strategies to bring about this new future, and organizing people and resources to implement the strategies. Only with serious Catholic engagement in public deliberation, along with other persons and groups of faith and goodwill, will the Church be a catalyst for a movement toward economic and racial justice and solidarity within our metropolitan regions.

5. Organize a Regional Synod on the Journey to Regional Solidarity.

Pope Francis has been encouraging “Synodality” within every level of the Church where people can listen to one another, learn from each other and take responsibility for proclaiming the Gospel. Several dioceses have used Synods as a way of planning to implement follow-up on the Bishops Synod on the Family and Pope Francis’ Apostolic Exhortation *The Joy of Love*.⁷ A similar approach can be used to implement a personal Synod on Regional Solidarity.

6. Create a post-parochial financial strategy to support these efforts of healing and reconciliation.

For the most part, the Catholic Church has pursued a parochial financial strategy, i.e., if a parish cannot develop the resources to support its sacramental and pastoral and educational ministries, then the leadership of the diocese will decide to close it or merge with another parish. There have been many innovative efforts to go beyond this parochial financial strategy. Yet, if our Church is going to be a catalyst and partner in healing the injustice of poverty and racism and creating strategies to bring about a greater realization of the common good, then our Church must develop post-parochial financial strategies that will support this effort. These strategies will demand that we as Catholics stretch ourselves to be more generous in supporting the Church’s task of promoting solidarity with the metropolitan region.

⁷ A good example of a Diocesan Synod is the one organized in the Diocese of San Diego by Bishop McElroy <https://www.sdcatholic.org/en-us/diocese/synodonthefamily/background.aspx>.

Appendix: A Process of Catholic Social Practice

Phases	Questions
<p>See clearly the situation: <i>Center</i> the voices of those impacted by injustice; <i>investigate</i> the context; and <i>define an issue</i> to be addressed</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What in the experience and stories of those suffering injustice provides insight into the social situation? • What relational, institutional, or cultural elements are presenting problems or barriers to human flourishing and how were those barriers constructed? • What assets, especially among the people suffering injustice, can be used to bring about change? • The current institutional and cultural arrangements are stable because they serve the interest of one or more groups. Whose interest is being served by the current arrangements? • What ideas provide a rationale for the current institutional arrangement - the current patterns of injustice? • Who promotes these ideas? How do we bring about change in these ideas? • Where is God at work in this reality?
<p>Judge with principles to foster integral human development: Together <i>imagine</i> a more just future and <i>deliberate</i> on the strategies to realize this future</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Is there a common ground among the stakeholders for a shared desired future (a vision that advances the common good) for the situation we are addressing? • Do the least advantaged see the desired future as a good? • Whose thinking must change and how must it change if we want to realize this shared vision? • How do we create a strategy to realize the shared vision that will mobilize the key assets and overcome the key problems and barriers that we have identified? • Will our strategy disrupt (change or transform) the social structures that support these problems and barriers?
<p>Act to advance the common good: <i>Mobilize</i> persons and financial resources to implement the strategy and <i>adapt</i> to changing circumstances</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How do we mobilize people in order to implement our strategy? • How can we mobilize resources needed to support our strategy? • How can we adjust our plans as we encounter surprises? • How do we keep people motivated and focused on the vision of justice? • What resistance are we encountering and what thinking is behind this resistance?
<p>Reflect with humility: <i>Evaluate</i> by comparing the actual outcomes to the desired outcomes and <i>learn</i> how to do better in the future</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What surprises did we encounter during the change process? • What did these surprises tell us about assumptions, our vision for change, and our strategy? • What do we need to change in order to advance justice? • How did the changes affect the least advantaged?