What is solidarity, and how does it apply to the marketplace?

Catherine Pakaluk, Ph.D.
ASSISTANT PROFESSOR OF ECONOMICS, AVE MARIA UNIVERSITY

INTRODUCTION
‘Solidarity’ lives in the popular imagination, like much of Catholic social thought, as a variety of straw-man representations. Each false image gets at least something right, but none of them really provides a proper conception of what solidarity is.

It’s easy to find these straw men. My favorite example, and maybe the worst, is the idea that progressive taxes are what solidarity is. Quebec has a ‘solidarity tax credit’ and the Germany’s income tax includes a ‘solidarity surcharge.’ There are many more examples of these kinds of taxes in the European Union and elsewhere. This is not to say that progressive taxes are bad, but rather, that progressive taxes aren’t what solidarity is.

Another popular image of solidarity comes from the ‘solidarity movement’ in Poland, which causes us to identify Christian labor unions with what solidarity is. Iconic images of Lech Walesa and his heroic co-workers will live in our memory for a long while, especially for those of us who remember the end of Soviet rule in Poland. We know too how much John Paul II inspired and cared for this movement in Poland, making it tempting to equate solidarity as a theological notion with the historical reality of such a fine movement.

A final straw man comes closer than the previous ones, but still falls short of a capturing what solidarity is. This notion says that solidarity is the same as charitable giving and the preferential option for the poor—especially the sick and the suffering. Under this misconception, all charitable activities, ranging from soup kitchens, to missionary work, to monetary donations, count as works of solidarity. I would like to say that this is often true—but not by virtue of giving stuff away or helping the poor per se. Rather, solidarity is something else, something that frequently gives rise to giving stuff away and helping the poor.

So what is solidarity exactly? And why is it that we rely on these blurry ideas about something that is a core principle of Catholic social doctrine? In what follows, I will argue that we lack a proper definition in existing magisterial documents.

DATA ON SOLIDARITY IN THE MAGISTERIAL DOCUMENTS
At first glance it may seem that we have a good definition of solidarity. To begin, there is the oft-cited passage from Sollicitudo §38 defining solidarity as “a firm and persevering determination to commit oneself to the common good.” But of course, it is a principle of Catholic social thought that all of social life ought to be ordered to the common good—so this definition by itself leaves us perhaps putting too much on solidarity. It would have to carry all of the various virtues and habits that are somehow related to the right ordering of social relations.
Now, at the same time, in the same passage, we find another idea: that solidarity is the virtue that arises from the recognition of interdependence. And finally, there is the notion of mutual responsibility. “We are all really responsible for all.” Note how many possible definitions arise from this one passage of Sollicitudo. Solidarity is not well defined here.

An observer might think that I have turned to Sollicitudo first as a rhetorical trick. After all, we don't expect encyclicals to provide concise definitions. But curiously, the Catechism too leaves us short of a consistent, working definition. We find in §1939 that solidarity is “also articulated in terms of friendship or social charity,” and “is a demand of human and Christian brotherhood.” Note that to say “A is also articulated in terms of B” is merely to say that it goes by another name—this is not yet to define what A is. Furthermore, to say that “A is a demand of C” is still not to define A. So it is critical to look at what the Catechism offers next. In §1940 the Catechism of the Catholic Church states “Solidarity is manifested in the first place by the distribution of goods and pay for work.”

At this point more than one contradiction arises. First, it is hard to see see how this is the primary manifestation of solidarity, when solidarity is also defined in Sollicitudo as the firm commitment to the common good. One wants to ask at this point whether the common good is chiefly material or spiritual? If the latter, how is the distribution of goods the primary expression of solidarity? Second, although we are first told that solidarity is also articulated as social charity, §1940 says that pay for work is a primary manifestation. But pay for work is primarily a matter of justice and not charity. So this seems to be a contradiction. We must conclude that solidarity is not well defined.

For one final piece of data on magisterial definitions of solidarity, I present the entire treatment of solidarity from the Compendium of Social Doctrine of the Church § 192-196. While the text is too long to quote here, the most striking fact is that in more than one thousand words on solidarity, the grammatical structure “solidarity is…” cannot be found. Instead the Compendium talks around solidarity in numerous ways, making reference to some of the same themes already mentioned here: interdependence, common good, inequality, justice, moral virtue, and more.

Taken together, these complex and competing ideas about solidarity are confusing at best, self-contradictory at worst. It can also seem as if a new idea about solidarity arises with each new pope, and each new document. Is there is a fixed point—a central conception of solidarity that reconciles each notion and puts the various descriptions in order? I believe the answer is yes, and it is vitally important to identify this fixed point. For we shan’t know how to live solidarity in business if we don’t first know what it is.
What is solidarity, and how does it apply to the marketplace?

ARRIVING AT A PROPER DEFINITION OF SOLIDARITY

I will therefore begin with a proposed working definition of solidarity—something like a draft version, if you will, since I have no authority to define this term on behalf of the magisterium. This definition is: unity arising from fraternal charity.

Solidarity begins with the recognition of a common humanity in all men: we belong to the same human family, and we have a common destiny. Common humanity is captured by the term “fraternal” which means “of brothers.” Brotherhood is a familial relation of rough equality; note that within a family the distinctions of class, education, ethnicity, and so on, do not apply because brothers are presumably the same in those respects. Brothers are “as one”. This reminds us that one of the earliest Christian impulses was to say that human distinctions of race and class are irrelevant to the basic call to love and live in communion. “No more Jew or Gentile, no more slave and freeman, no more male and female; you are all one person in Jesus Christ.” (Gal 3:28) Therefore, solidarity is the virtue by which we aim to introduce a fraternal spirit into the social order. This is the spirit captured by the winsome story of the older sibling carrying the younger child, and saying, when asked if the youngster was a burden: “he ain’t heavy—he’s my brother.”

There are three parts to this definition, and so in what follows I will unpack solidarity, according to this definition, by working through the three sections in the appropriate logical order, which arises when one considers that “fraternal” modifies charity: unity arising from charity that is fraternal.

A. Fraternity: “He Ain’t Heavy, He’s My Brother”
Now immediately, when we think of this image of brother carrying brother, we have arrived at the sense of solidarity which is typically rendered “all are responsible for all”, or mutual responsibility. Because all men are my brothers, I am responsible for them. Because all men are my brothers, works of charity seem as nothing to me—no burden at all. So a definition of solidarity that anchors the virtue in “fraternal” charity is critical. It is this “fraternal” that is meant to be the source of mutual responsibility.

It is interesting to note here that the earliest known use of “solidarity” in English seems to be around 1841, coming from the French word solidarité, meaning, “communion of interests and responsibilities, mutual responsibility”. We also know that solidarité was very much in use in France between 1775 and 1840. At the same time we know that that fraternité becomes a critical word for the French at this time in history. So there is good reason to think that fraternity is an essential part of a proper conception of solidarity.

B. Charity: Willing the Good of Each

But solidarity doesn’t stop merely at this fraternal spirit of mutual responsibility and interdependence—already an admirable goal on a human level. Solidarity asks for fraternal charity—caritas. It is one thing to love our brothers, and quite another thing to love those who are not our family. And this is exactly what is included in the conception of solidarity found in Catholic social thought. Solidarity maintains that we are all brothers in the human family, and these familial relationships should be characterized by acts of friendship and love.

Many questions arise when we come to understand solidarity as fraternal love for all men. An important one is, do we have to love everyone in the world equally? St. Thomas says no, we need not, for “love can be unequal in two ways.” To love, he taught, is to will the good of another. Therefore, love can be unequal in what we wish for others, and also in the intensity of our action towards that good. In the wishing, Thomas says we should wish the same good for all men: namely everlasting happiness. But in the intensity of action towards the good of others—on this score we need not, indeed cannot, love all men equally. This is a relief, and seems
What is solidarity, and how does it apply to the marketplace?

Another important question follows immediately from the first. If we need not love all men equally, which men should we love more than others? Here again, St. Thomas provides eminently sensible advice in the Summa II.II 26. He recommends that we should love those near to us more than those far from us, that we should love those in need more than those with lesser need, and finally, that we should love those for whom we have particular responsibility more than those for whom we do not—such as family, friends, or employees.

Finally, in the same part of the Summa (II.II 26, 5), St. Thomas offers the reason for loving our neighbor: “fellowship in the full participation of happiness.” Now “fellowship” is something like “oneness” or “unity”, and “participated happiness” just is the common good. Here, then, is the sought-after connection between solidarity and the common good so described by John Paul II in Solicitudo §38. And here too is the bridge to unity.

John Paul II describes two kinds of human bonding, or unity: first, that of belonging to the same human race; and second, a “new model of unity” arising from love between men. We can detect here precisely the entire “concept” or “notion” that solidarity aims to encapsulate. Solidarity is that Christian virtue through which, beginning from imperfect unity which is characteristic of mere biological participation in the human family, we aim, through acts of real love, at perfect unity. Solidarity can therefore be increased through two kinds of acts: acts of love, and acts of unity.

Though we are not used to thinking of the difference between love and unity, consider that without some distinction, solidarity would be identical to charity—we would have no need for the refinement we call solidarity. Now unity is the “end” of all true love—love by its nature unites. But in the natural order, some relationships are unitive by nature—such as marriage—while others are not. Therefore it is through the virtue of solidarity that we aim at actual unity with our friends and neighbors—and not only at friendship or love of neighbor.

To see the difference, recall the story of the Missionaries of Charity when they moved into San Francisco. The Diocese gave them a house, and had renovated it for them—giving them new appliances, a large water heater, and fresh carpeting. When Mother Teresa arrived, she and her sisters rolled up the carpets and threw them away. They instructed workers to remove the water heater. They made several other de-renovations that shocked and even insulted some of the kind people in the diocese. Why did they do this? Because the Missionaries aim to serve the poor—to work for their good—and this is charity. But they also wish to live like the poor—to experience what they experience—and this is unity, the sort of unity which solidarity aims to inspire in us.
With this definition in hand, I wish to return to some of the passages that seemed to lack a working definition. We may now understand those passages afresh, as if for the first time.

According to this passage, solidarity “has many points of contact with charity.” Solidarity is also born from brotherhood of all men in Christ, and inspires a “new model of unity.” Hence we have that solidarity is unity arising from fraternal charity.

Turning now to other treatments of solidarity beyond Solicitudo, I ask the same question: is the draft definition here consistent with the various usages of solidarity in magisterial documents? Consider John Paul II’s comment in Centesimus §10.

Already, with the new definition in hand, unity arising from fraternal charity, Solicitudo §38 is more intelligible as a description of a Christian virtue that tends to unity in the pursuit of the common good. And this, the Pope wants to say, is opposed to a reductive set of shallow sentiments. But if we move forward and look at the full text of Solicitudo §40, we find the definition even more striking. This passage contains what is arguably the best description of solidarity in that encyclical—but without the working definition it would be easy to miss even here.

John Paul II links solidarity with friendship and love—and he goes on to claim that this is implicitly the case in Leo XIII’s great encyclical Rerum Novarum. This is a striking thing, of course, since Leo never used the term “solidarity.” But a close reading of Rerum Novarum §25 reveals that same formulation again—bonds (unity) of friendship and brotherly love, arising from a recognition of common humanity, and a single, common destiny, which is the common good of all men.
What is solidarity, and how does it apply to the marketplace?

Strikingly, one finds that same formulation also in the following passage from the Christmas Message of John XXIII in 1959.

Aristotle states that friendship between men gives rise to unity within the state. He also states that this unity arising from friendship was believed to be the greatest good of the state. Beautifully, then, this same concept is perfected in social thought among Christians from the very beginning. It is perfected since with Christianity the grounds for friendship are expanded in a way that the Greeks didn’t think about.

IMPLICATIONS FOR THE MARKETPLACE

In the space that remains, I will outline briefly six implications of this working definition of solidarity.

A comprehensive examination of every usage of solidarity in Catholic social thought, which cannot be presented here, yields this same, consistent formulation of what solidarity is. What remains to be shown here is one final thing which one may possibly find quite incredible—or altogether credible depending on one’s prior familiarity with the history of Catholic thought.

In Centesimus §10, John Paul II wrote that solidarity, or “social friendship,” was a concept already possessed by the Greeks. While many passages could be cited, here is one from Aristotle’s Politics that is particularly striking for its closeness to what we are here discussing.

1. Solidarity is not social justice

To take just one example to start with, consider the above passage from Caritas in Veritate by Pope Benedict. Many people, reading this text, worried that the Pope was arguing that market functions be replaced with some kind of new “system” of gift and gratuitousness? But, as the Pope begins with an appeal to solidarity, we can say with certainty that this is not the case.

To see this, note from the earlier discussion that solidarity does not principally concern exchanges. Exchanges are governed by a distinct virtue, namely justice, by which we give others what is due to them. Solidarity is instead tied to the
virtue of charity (and friendship), by which we seek to give others what is their good.

So when the Pope says that we need “internal forms of solidarity and mutual trust” for proper economic function, he is saying that those persons who interact in the economy—whether as employers and employees, or buyers and sellers—should strive to interact as friends and not as mere agents. This does not mean each transaction requires a business lunch on the side. But it does mean that we should aim to avoid the fallen impulse to view other people as means to an end. If we go through a check-out line without a smile, an inquiry, an expression of human solidarity, then we have merely used the other person.

Another way to put this point is to say that solidarity is not social justice. Rather, solidarity is social charity. Now charity presupposes justice, since charity is a higher order virtue. But to equate social charity with social justice is to ask for too much from justice—thereby subverting and weakening justice. If charity can be left to charity, then the juridical order stands robust—eager to be perfected by the gratuitousness and gift—friendship and love—of which Benedict speaks. Pius XI in *Quadragesimo Ann* provides the clearest example from Catholic social thought of these two pillars laid out side by side.

2. Solidarity, Friendship and the Knowledge of Persons

Solidarity can’t be lived without living friendship, and friendship can’t be exercised without a real knowledge of other people. So solidarity will always favor a marketplace in which agents can and do know something about each other. Take farming for example. Most of us have no idea how our food gets to the table. We don’t know the people who grow it, process it, transport it, or prepare it. So it is hard to think about being in solidarity with farmers when we don’t know any farmers, and don’t know anything about what a farmer cares about. This sad reality surely motivates the Starbucks-style campaigns in which we see a poster with a photo of “Jose” together with text assuring us that us he was paid a fair wage. I doubt that these campaigns can really advance human solidarity as we have understood it, but they do speak to the fact that no one likes a purely impersonal marketplace.

For real growth in solidarity, what is probably more important is that each layer of management at Starbucks has real relationships within the corporation, both vertically and laterally. As for me, a faux relationship with the guy who picked my beans has little value. But I can probably work to improve the way I deal with the people behind the counter—putting my phone away, for example, making eye contact, and providing a friendly greeting day after day.

There are many implications that can be worked out for various circumstances in business and the marketplace. But the central principle is that solidarity requires friendship, and friendship requires knowledge of persons. This principle represents a large challenge in an increasingly centralized marketplace, and a digital-virtual economy.

3. Solidarity, Friendship and Gifts

Sometimes—very often—solidarity demands that we give things away. But a quick survey of much of what passes for Western charitable giving leads to an important clarification. First and foremost, solidarity demands that we treat others as friends—and as equals as much as possible. This principle should remain central in the manner and substance of our giving as in other areas of friendship. For example, as I have argued elsewhere, creating a job (or many jobs) may be more
fitting of a relationship of friendship than a pure donation. By the same token, education and training may be a better gift than a gift of capital for investment—depending on the conditions. I leave the development of this to a further analysis—but one can see here the contours of an argument for decreased regulation of businesses, precisely for the sake of providing a most suitable means for the giving of gifts in the manner of friendship.

4. Solidarity Corrects Against Individualism
A proper conception of solidarity really says that individualism is an inadequate social philosophy—we are enjoined not to think in terms of our own narrow interests, and not even in terms of some kind of Lockean or Smithian individualism in which we blithely suppose that individual interest-seeking is a tide that lifts all boats. Solidarity requires not only that we do good things for others, but also that we understand ourselves to be really aiming at unity with others. As this is true, solidity favors arrangements in human affairs in which we are really tied in with each other, dependent upon each other. This dependency need not be legal or contractual, but it does need to be real. If others around us rise and fall, and we are yet the same—it makes no difference to us—surely something is wrong.

5. Solidarity Corrects Against Collectivism
Following upon the above, getting clear about what solidarity is helps to remind us that the great poles of social thought are not communism and capitalism. In fact these are not even opposites in any intelligible way. Rather, the great poles, called the twin rocks of shipwreck by Pius XI, are collectivism and individualism. Therefore, just as solidarity is that virtue whereby we reject individualism soundly, it is also that virtue whereby collectivism is rejected. At first glance this may seems paradoxical—since solidarity aims at unity, which appears to be the aim of collectivists. But in fact, solidarity calls for a unity built upon the good of each man, not a unity that sacrifices the good of each man for the good of the collective.

This highlights the authentic genius in the proper conception of solidarity—as with all things Catholic. Solidarity delivers us both the nobility of the singular good, and the majesty of the common good. We get the good parts of collectivism and individualism, if Christian principles prevail, but none of the bad parts. No wonder, indeed, that Pius XI called solidarity—social charity—the soul of the social order.

6. Solidarity Unites the Practical and Speculative Orders
Perhaps the most interesting thing about getting it right about solidarity is the conclusion that there is an analog between the social virtues and the individual ones. In the private sphere, the moral life—what we should do—is understood properly only in terms of the end of human life—what we should be. The goal of our striving is not exactly love—but union with God. Love is the means to union with God. But the love is for the union—the union is not for the love.

Solidarity says that the same holds true in social life. We aim to love others—to live a moral life—so that we can achieve union with others. Now that union with others becomes sensible, desirable in fact, if it is also union with God. And this is what we call the common good: fellowship in participated happiness, in union with God. ★
To read other presentations from the conference, please visit http://business.cua.edu/libertyandsolidarity/. 
“With academics, policy makers, ethicists, theologians, and business leaders as presenters, the conference delivered the ideal blend of business theory, social responsibility, theological inspiration, and best practices.”

— ROBERT J. SPITZER, S.J., PH.D, President, Magis Center and Napa Institute

“It was a great joy for me to share ideas with colleagues already given to our Christian anthropology and to do so in the spirit-centering (and mind-expanding) context of daily prayer and sacrament. I’ve never been party to such fruitful exchanges.”

— LLOYD SANDELANDS, Professor of Management and Organization, Stephen M. Ross School of Business Administration, University of Michigan

“The conference was profound because of so many fundamental shifts in perspective. Amazing quality of speakers.”

— LOUIS KIM, Vice President, Hewlett-Packard

“This is a very important topic of integration of business leadership and faith. It’s always a great joy for me to be around people who are excited about incorporating their love of God into a passionate business world.”

— ANDY LAVALLEE, Founder & CEO, LaVallee’s Bakery