The Challenge of Human Solidarity in Pope Benedict's *Caritas in Veritate*

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Introduction

What is human solidarity? Let me step outside theology for a few moments, just to open up this fascinating topic. A few weeks ago I was introduced to a branch of psychology called 'self-determination theory'. It looks at how human beings grow and mature, and especially at how our social environment affects this. The theory suggests that there are three basic needs that we all have in our journey towards psychological maturity and well-being: autonomy, relatedness, and competence. 'Autonomy' is our need to be ourselves, to have a sense of freedom and responsibility for who we are and for the choices we make. 'Relatedness' is our need to connect with others, in love and friendship; and the need to belong in wider ways, through different types of community and communication. 'Competence' highlights the fact that it is not enough just to discover ourselves or to belong. We also need to have a purpose, a role, a skill, something to contribute to a bigger project. It's not just that we want to be valued in the subjective eyes of others; we also want to be objectively valuable.

I found this very useful, thinking about the different kinds of social environments I have belonged to in my life: family, school, college, workplace, seminary, parish, etc. All three basic 'self-determination' needs have been jostling with each other, often only half-consciously. What happens if one need is not met? If you have lots of freedom but no commitment? If you have lots of love but nothing to do?

It struck me that the different needs are represented by our names. I know how much the tradition of naming varies in each culture. For myself, 'Stephen' is personal. It's not unique (there are many Stephens in the world), but it points to my individuality within my own family, to my autonomy. 'Wang' is my family name; it signifies my relatedness to my family in the present, and to the family as it extends back into the past – but only on my father's side! And what about middle names? Quite often in England a middle name is a way of connecting an individual with a particularly loved relation, e.g. an uncle or aunt, a grandfather and grandmother. The Chinese custom is particularly interesting. My middle name is 'Wei-Jon'. 'Jon' is personal to me – it functions in Chinese in the way that 'Stephen' does in English. But 'Wei' is a generational name – something we don't have in the English tradition. It's a name given to all the males in my generation, across the extended family. So not just my brother but all my male first cousins have the same generational name. It shows this extra level of relatedness.

Why do I start with this long preamble about psychology and naming, when my task is to look at the theme of solidarity in the last two chapters of Pope Benedict's encyclical *Caritas in Veritate*? Because it's as if Pope Benedict is talking directly about universal issues that are

raised in many different contexts, not just by Christians or those involved in social issues. I take these insights from psychology as an example of one context. He uses the word 'solidarity', a word from the Catholic tradition of social teaching, but it's the wised cluster of ideas that interests him.

For example, at the beginning of chapter 5, Pope Benedict recognises the tragedy of human isolation. He writes that we have a 'basic and tragic tendency to close in on ourselves, thinking ourselves to be self-sufficient or merely an insignificant and ephemeral fact, "strangers" in a random universe. We are alienated when we are alone' [53]. This lack of relatedness is part of fallen human nature; and it's part of much contemporary life in a particularly acute way. We need others, says Pope Benedict; we need to understand that 'the human race is a single family working together in true communion, not simply a group of subjects who happen to live side by side' [53]. The themes of autonomy ('subjects'), relatedness ('family', 'communion'), and competence ('working together') are woven together in this encyclical.

Different questions arise quite naturally from these themes - questions about who we are as human beings, that can't be answered purely on the psychological level. How is it possible to reach out to others, without reducing that reaching out to a form of self-seeking and subjectivity? And if we do belong to others, how can we preserve our rightful autonomy? And if we can develop a theory of solidary, does this encompass everyone, or are some human beings excluded from this belonging? I want to spend the rest of the article looking at Pope Benedict's answers to these questions, and reflecting on what they mean for our understanding of what it is to be human.

How is it possible to connect with others?

If I put myself and my psychological needs at the theoretical centre of everything I do, then how will it be possible truly to reach outside myself to others? Even my relationships will ultimately just be a way of satisfying my own personal needs and desires; they will have the paradoxical effect of trapping me in myself. This is like the common argument against altruism: I think I am being kind and caring, but this is just a form of self-love, a way of pleasing myself.

The problem here, thinks Pope Benedict, is the assumption that we start as autonomous beings reaching out to others in order to fulfil our needs. In the tradition of Catholic social teaching, our solidarity with others is not just a personal need, it is part of what constitutes our very being. 'As a spiritual being, the human creature is defined through interpersonal relations. The more authentically he or she lives these relations, the more his or her own personal identity matures' [53]. Our identity is formed by relationships. Reaching out to others is not first of all something we do to fulfil a need; it's simply a part of who we are. So part of our being, the core of who we are, is *not* being, it's letting go of oneself and reaching out to others – not necessarily for our own gain. In Christian terms, this is to imitate the self-emptying of Christ. Humility before others, which seems to be a moment of loss, is actually a personal gain.

This is why relationships still matter even when they don't seem to be meeting our short-term psychological needs; why a commitment to a marriage or family or parish or community can be 'worthwhile' even when it seems to cost us more than it gives us. And this is why the

process of going outside ourselves in generosity and sacrifice is so important for our own human maturity. Often we lose ourselves in order to find ourselves.

You see this in young children. Parents often spend the first year or two after a birth trying to give their children everything they want and need; to help them grow. And then, at the toddler stage, they realise that this constant giving and satisfying will corrupt them, and make them horribly selfish. Parents often switch gear at this stage, and begin to refuse to give them what they want all the time, and to teach them to share and be aware of the needs of others. In one sense you could see this as a restriction or limitation. But of course learning to let go, to look outwards to others, is actually a deeper way of learning to be oneself. Children are not just isolated bundles of needs, they are persons-in-relation. The reason we are sad when we see a spoiled child is because getting what you want all the time traps you in yourself, and this form of isolation is particularly heartbreaking.

Pope John Paul II wrote a lot about this in his theology of the body. He has a lovely image of Adam and Eve seeing each other for the first time, emerging from solitude into union. And the key moment is not the recognition that 'I have found you' but 'in finding you I have discovered myself'. We cannot know who we truly are when we are isolated and alone. This is, according to Pope Benedict, the metaphysics of solidarity.

How can we preserve our autonomy?

How then, if my identity depends on relating to other people, can I somehow preserve my individuality and autonomy? Does this relatedness mean that my personality and uniqueness get smothered? We can think of parents who are indeed too possessive and controlling; of schools where the discipline is so rigid that the children are afraid to be themselves; of people who almost define themselves in terms of self-abnegation so that we wonder if there is really any self to negate.

In response to these questions Pope Benedict writes: 'A metaphysical understanding of the relations between persons is therefore of great benefit for their development. In this regard, reason finds inspiration and direction in Christian revelation, according to which the human community does not absorb the individual, annihilating his autonomy, as happens in the various forms of totalitarianism, but rather values him all the more because the relation between individual and community is a relation between one totality and another' [53]. This means that even when I relate to another person or belong to a community, I preserve my uniqueness and personal identity. I am not just a part, a fraction, but a 'totality', a whole, in relationship with other persons who are themselves unique. Solidarity does not entail falling into the oblivion of a communal trance.

A beautiful passage follows here: 'Just as a family does not submerge the identities of its individual members, just as the Church rejoices in each "new creation" (Gal 6:15; 2 Cor 5:17) incorporated by Baptism into her living Body, so too the unity of the human family does not submerge the identities of individuals, peoples and cultures, but makes them more transparent to each other and links them more closely in their legitimate diversity' [53]. Of course the family can become dysfunctional or oppressive. But we can see in a healthy family how people become more themselves by belonging.

‘In particular, in the light of the revealed mystery of the Trinity, we understand that true openness does not mean loss of individual identity but profound interpenetration. This also emerges from the common human experiences of love and truth’ [54]. Pope Benedict applies this above all to the sacramental union between husband-and-wife.

I see these issues being played out in the seminary where I teach. Young men arrive full of ideals, wanting to be holy priests, and modelling themselves on the priests that they know and the saints they admire – whether this be St John Vianney or St Ignatius or whoever. And this is a good thing! But there is a gradual shift over the first couple of years, as they see how they are called to be themselves as well, to discover a model of priestly holiness that has never existed before. There is no conflict here – it's part of the proper balance of belonging and autonomy.

Is anyone excluded from this belonging?

If it is possible to connect and to belong, and in the process to preserve your own identity and uniqueness, this gives rise to the third and more provocative question: Is anyone excluded from this belonging? Who gets to belong? Who is included in this solidarity? Who, ultimately, is to be considered human?

These may sound like strange questions, because we have grown up in late 20th century, and we are familiar with the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. We forget that at different times and in different cultures various categories of people have been excluded from this social and political solidarity – women, slaves, indigenous peoples, criminals, and many others. And we become slightly complacent now, thinking that the matter has been settled and we know what the answer is: ‘The answer is obvious. Everyone is human, and everyone should be included.’

But Pope Benedict is very concrete, and throughout the encyclical he names various forms of exclusion, and discusses various groups that are marginalised in contemporary societies: those without education, migrants, the poor, drug addicts, the unemployed, etc. His answer to this question of ‘who belongs?’ is founded on a philosophical argument. He writes that dialogue between cultures, religions and political groups is only possible if people recognise that there is a common human nature and a universal moral law that arises from this, even accepting the differences. ‘This universal moral law provides a sound basis for all cultural, religious and political dialogue, and it ensures that the multi-faceted pluralism of cultural diversity does not detach itself from the common quest for truth, goodness and God. Thus adherence to the law etched on human hearts is the precondition for all constructive social cooperation’ [59].

He warns against ‘the separation of culture from human nature. Thus, cultures can no longer define themselves within a nature that transcends them, and man ends up being reduced to a mere cultural statistic. When this happens, humanity runs new risks of enslavement and manipulation’ [26]. And in a later passage about the environment he writes: ‘Reducing nature merely to a collection of contingent data ends up doing violence to the environment and even encouraging activity that fails to respect human nature itself. Our nature, constituted not only by matter but also by spirit, and as such, endowed with transcendent meaning and aspirations, is also normative for culture. Human beings interpret and shape the natural environment through culture, which in turn is given direction by the responsible use of

freedom, in accordance with the dictates of the moral law' [48]. In other words, if you don't believe that all human beings share a common human nature, and if you don't believe that this human nature is a foundation for at least some common moral principles, then you won't have any foundation for your goal of human solidarity. Exclusion will be unavoidable.

There is a paradox here: In order to justify some notion of difference and diversity, there needs to be some common thread linking the differences and helping people to interpret and value them. If I am different from you, and you live within a different culture from me, and we want to respect each other's differences, then we need some common moral understanding about respecting differences, some way of respecting the underlying humanity that unites us.

Again, Pope Benedict gives some concrete examples. He writes in section 75 that under certain circumstances life is deemed no longer worth living. He is writing about abortion, the eugenic selection of embryos, and euthanasia. But it's important to note that he is not just making a pro-life point. His argument is much bigger. It's that as soon as you exclude certain categories of human beings from the class of those who are allowed to participate in human solidarity, then you undermine the foundations of all solidarity. If you exclude the unborn, the terminally ill, or the disabled, you don't just exclude the unborn, the terminally ill, or the disabled, you make all true human solidarity impossible – because what you have left is a form of belonging that is based upon power and exclusion. So even for those who think they belong, for the lucky ones who are still on the inside, this form of belonging is no longer an opening out to others, releasing them from solitude and isolation; it has become a closing in on themselves, a corruption.

This is how Pope Benedict puts it: There is a 'damaging assertion of control over life that under certain circumstances is deemed no longer worth living. Underlying these scenarios are cultural viewpoints that deny human dignity. These practices in turn foster a materialistic and mechanistic understanding of human life. Who could measure the negative effects of this kind of mentality for development? How can we be surprised by the indifference shown towards situations of human degradation, when such indifference extends even to our attitude towards what is and is not human? What is astonishing is the arbitrary and selective determination of what to put forward today as worthy of respect. Insignificant matters are considered shocking, yet unprecedented injustices seem to be widely tolerated. While the poor of the world continue knocking on the doors of the rich, the world of affluence runs the risk of no longer hearing those knocks, on account of a conscience that can no longer distinguish what is human' [75].

The key line here is about the arbitrariness of the definition of what is considered human: 'What is astonishing is the arbitrary and selective determination of what to put forward today as worthy of respect'. The fact that you can exclude one group from the category of being human, for whatever reason, and the fact that you no longer base your definition on an objective understanding of human nature and an objective moral law, means there is no longer anything to stop you making another exclusion for another reason at some moment in the future.

There is a particular challenge for Catholics here. It's not possible to separate pro-life issues, and issues within bioethics, from questions of social justice and development. They are both, at heart, the single issue of human solidarity. If you introduce one arbitrary definition of what

allows someone to be included in the category of 'human being', to be given rights and respect, in effect you make it impossible for anyone to hold onto their inherent human dignity, because everyone is conscious or half-conscious that they too may one day be excluded.

Conclusion

I started this article by looking at 'self-determination theory', and its helpful account of three fundamental psychological needs that we all share – a need for autonomy, for relatedness, and for an experience of personal competence. These needs, as Pope Benedict shows, reflect a deeper metaphysical truth, that we are constituted as persons-in-relation. We are made to open out to others in relationships of charity and justice, and to reach out to those in other cultures and societies in dialogue and mutual support. We can do this because of our common human nature, and an appreciation of the moral law that guides all peoples, a law beyond culture and language.

These bonds of belonging do not take away our freedom and autonomy; they help us to be more truly ourselves. All of this, for Pope Benedict, points to the deepest meaning of solidarity. He sees various dangers to solidarity, especially the desire in some cultures to exclude certain groups of human beings from the category of those who are deemed worthy to belong. But he is not pessimistic. The innate human desire for solidarity, and the added vision given by the Gospel, is what gives energy to Catholic social teaching and to the vision sketched in the encyclical *Caritas in Veritate*.

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