Probably at no time in the history of humanity has the notion of solidarity and its exercise been more keenly and intuitively understood and acted on than in the days and weeks following the disaster caused by the tidal wave in South East Asia in December 2004. Due to the power of modern media technology, the shock and horror of the disaster unfolded in the homes of people around the world within hours of its occurrence. And, as the tragedies of its aftermath unfolded for the people immediately involved, there was an outpouring of shared emotion around the world – shock, horror, grief, fear, incomprehension, sympathy, anger, followed rapidly by the need and desire to do something. Individuals and groups, institutions, churches and governments reacted with what can be seen to be a truly human response to the plight of the suffering people. Solidarity took over and showed us that people really do care about their fellow human beings. Despite the inequities in many of the structures and systems we are all part of, we learn at first hand that it is more human to empathise with people in their suffering, it is more human to want to alleviate the pain of others, it is more human to do something practical – to go there, to be with the people, to give money or goods or time. It is more human to pray in solidarity with stricken humanity as we saw in the moving ceremony from Thailand where representatives of many faiths and churches gathered to remember those who lost their lives in this most awful of ‘natural disasters’.

The social teaching of the church has consistently called for solidarity between people and peoples. In recent times the call has become more urgent and more focused with Popes, from...
John XXIII in the sixties to John Paul II in the present, stressing solidarity as the appropriate relationship for authentic human progress and development. For example, in his 1961 encyclical *Mater et Magistra*, John XXIII spoke of solidarity, which ‘binds all people together as members of a common family, making it impossible for wealthy nations to look with indifference on the plight of other nations whose citizens do not enjoy even basic human rights.’ (157) He refers to the growing interdependence of nations and the impossibility of preserving a lasting peace while glaring economic and social inequalities persist. Paul VI in his 1967 encyclical letter on the Development of Peoples, *Populorum Progressio*, noting that the ‘social question’ has become worldwide, wrote, ‘there can be no progress towards the complete development of man without the simultaneous development of all humanity in the spirit of solidarity.’ (Without going into the issue of language in current church documents, and the use of ‘man’ as generic, it goes without saying that solidarity specifically in relation to gender was not yet a pressing issue for many people.) Paul VI goes on to ask a series of questions of those who have more than they need.

Is he prepared to support out of his own pocket works and undertakings organised in favour of the most destitute? Is he ready to pay higher taxes so that the public authorities can intensify their efforts in favour of development? Is he ready to pay a higher price for imported goods so that the producer may be more justly rewarded, or to leave his country, if necessary and if he is young, in order to assist in this development of the young nations?"

It is not just recent weeks in Ireland that illustrate that there is an increasing number of people taking these questions seriously. The fact that the issue of higher taxes for badly-needed development of public services at home, and of the delivery of promised aid to developing countries, is heatedly, if spasmodically, dis-

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cussed in the media by politicians and others is testimony to our taking it seriously as a nation. The question of linking fair trading conditions to the issue of development and debt relief for poorer nations has been gathering momentum.  

But never has the need for solidarity been more acute. The tsunami disaster shocked us into immediate response, but the daily death toll from the HIV-AIDS tidal wave, and the millions of our fellow human beings living with AIDS, directly or indirectly, although not brought to our screens in the same way, cry out for something of the same concern and sympathy and real engagement with them in their ongoing crisis. Enda McDonagh, in ‘The Catholic Church and HIV/AIDS’, (The Furrow, October 2004), reminds us that each of us is part of the body of human kind and that ‘the whole human race has HIV-AIDS’. He reminds us too that ‘In Catholic social teaching justice is the key to recognising the status and dignity of each person within the community in what might be called individual justice, while pursuing the overall good and equity of the community through social justice.’

What does solidarity mean?  
So is it obvious then what we mean by solidarity and that we are doing it well enough?  

Reflecting in 1982 on the experience of solidarity from the particular context of El Salvador, Jon Sobrino, a Jesuit priest, philosopher and theologian, who has spent his life working in that country, describes the movement of solidarity towards the people and the church of El Salvador. In Theology of Christian Solidarity (1982), his intention was to define, in Christian terms, the meaning and roots of solidarity, and to show what the ‘rediscovery of solidarity’ means for the church and for faith. The situ-

2. The International Jesuit Network for Development held a conference, Debt and Trade: Time to Make the Connections, in Dublin in Sept 2004, bringing together speakers from developing countries, the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund, and Development Cooperation Ireland. Papers, edited by the Centre for Faith and Justice, are to be published by Veritas in 2005.
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ation of many people in that country was one of life in inhuman conditions whose most ‘elemental human rights are utterly vio-
lated, and who are repressed in all their just strivings for liber-
atation’. It is in the following description that we can see the evolving of solidarity as it has come to be understood in contem-
porary Catholic social thought.

Many individuals and institutions have made the church of El Salvador their ‘neighbour’ in the gospel meaning of that term: they have not taken a detour in order to avoid seeing the wounded victim on the road, but instead have come closer to examine the situation and to help. Cardinals, archbishops, bishops, priests and religious men and women of the Catholic Church, delegations from Protestant churches, and theologians both Catholic and Protestant have come to this country. Many professional politicians, journalists, jurists, members of human rights organisations and aid agencies, have also come and many of them in addition to their profes-
sional capacity have shown their specific concern as Christians. They have carried out their visit in a Christian way, engaging in dialogue with church personnel, taking part in meetings and liturgical celebrations with other Christians and, most of all, coming close to suffering Salvadorans in the countryside, in jails, and in refugee camps.3

Sobrino goes on to describe the solidarity of those who could not come to El Salvador but made the Salvadorans really their ‘neighbour’. This was achieved by means of letters from grass-
roots Christian communities all over the world, statements from bishops and Episcopal Conferences denouncing the repression and the violation of human rights, the sending of aid and the or-
ganisation of solidarity committees in many countries for the sharing of information, fund-raising, pressuring governments, organising liturgies and solidarity demonstrations. There were still others who came from outside and remained forever at the side of the people as martyrs.

What is most striking about his account is that solidarity is about engaging with people at a deep level and is fundamentally different from the giving of material aid which is obviously good and necessary and, as he points out, a correct response to the ethical imperative. Sobrino goes on to say that if solidarity were no more than material aid it would be no more than a magnified kind of almsgiving where givers offer something they own without thereby feeling a ‘deep-down personal commitment’ or without feeling any need to continue this aid. In authentic solidarity the first effort to give aid commits a person at a deeper level than that of mere giving and becomes an ongoing process and not a contribution. In other words, the giver too is changed in a way that is radical and ongoing.

In El Salvador, following the initial giving of aid, the giving and receiving churches set up relationships. It was not a matter of a one-way flow of aid but of mutual giving and receiving. It is this point that is crucial for an understanding of what solidarity actually means.

A value of the exercise carried out by Jon Sobrino is in its being transferable to other situations. Whether we are talking about solidarity between individuals or groups, churches or nations, the key to authenticity is in relationship, in recognising the interdependence and mutual giving and receiving that is involved. This is very different from the kind of solidarity that is an alliance to promote particular interests. According to Sobrino’s account, solidarity begins when some churches help another church in need because it has taken on solidarity with the poor and oppressed among its own people. The helping churches find that they not only give but also receive from the church they aid. What they receive is of a different and higher order and they usually describe it as new inspiration in faith, and help in discovering their identities in human, ecclesial, and Christian terms, and in relationship to God. Through mutual giving and receiving the churches establish relationships and discover that in principle it is essential that a local church be united to another church, and that in principle this mutual rela-
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ionship embraces all levels of life, from material aid to faith in God.

Another positive element for me is that it shows the interconectedness of small steps and how together they can make a big difference. This gives the lie to the notion that we can do nothing to change things, and to the despondence of so many people about the enormity of many problems and situations and their capacity to change anything. Rather, the smallest step taken by an individual in authentic solidarity is of the greatest signifi-
cance.

Solidarity in the teaching of John Paul II

Almost certainly the reflection published in 1985 by Jon Sobrino was influential in the presentation of the teaching on solidarity by John Paul II in his 1987 encyclical *Solicitudo Rei Socialis*, (38) and repeated in the 1988 encyclical *Christifideles Laici*, (42). Speaking about the active and responsible participation of all in public life, and of how we are, all of us, the goal of public life as well as its leading participants, he writes the following:

(solidarity) is not a feeling of vague compassion or shallow distress at the misfortune of so many people, both near and far. On the contrary, it 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 really responsible for all.

Of course it is not necessary to go to El Salvador in the past to find instances of authentic solidarity. I think of the ongoing commitment and relationships of Irish groups involved in, for example, the Chernobyl disaster, or the plight of children in some Romanian orphanages, or the many who have shown an enduring solidarity with people and places they initially reached out to in crisis. The giving and receiving, the reciprocity involved, are evident, and solidarity of this sort gives meaning and identity to those involved just as in Sobrino’s example. Further, it would seem likely that authentic solidarity in one
context would preclude the opposite of solidarity in other areas. Racism, classism, sexism, clericalism, lack of due care for the earth and other ‘isms’ are precluded by authentic solidarity with the other who suffers in these contexts.

In 1991 the Jesuit Centre for Faith and Justice published a booklet entitled *Solidarity: The Missing Link in Irish Society*. Times were very different then and the vision of solidarity was offered in a context of high unemployment, of pre-peace process Northern Ireland and a relatively indifferent Ireland vis à vis ‘the troubles’, of a church often seeming to work only from the values of the better off in society. Noting the generosity of the Irish people in giving aid to developing countries, the authors point out that it is more difficult for us to respond to problems that exist at home. In a section on ‘Solidarity and Civic Life’ the authors write:

> We are hampered by a terrible individualism. This has many aspects. It is in line with the pervasive individualism of the international capitalist culture which shapes and deforms our way of thinking, valuing, and acting, and which puts a tremendous stress on the achievements of the individual no matter how this affects the rest of society.4

They go on to highlight the need for structural solidarity. This would mean that we rely not just on attitudes and behaviour but that solidarity should be built into legal, social and economic institutions which would truly reflect the values of solidarity emerging more randomly in the culture. Has this been progressing over the period of the past ten years, or is there an unacknowledged battle going on in Irish society between the solidarity that we might all say we desire and the individualism that seems to grow in us as we become more wealthy?

Wealthy Ireland

The signs of the new wealth that has been Ireland’s in the last few years are everywhere. You couldn’t keep up with the numbers of cranes that keep appearing, heralding new hotels and apartment blocks, houses and offices, shopping centres, and giant retail outlets. And that’s just new building. Look at the home improvement situation and you can see extensions, and attic conversions, modernisations and regenerations, landscaped gardens and patios, and the accompanying gadgets and equipment needed to enjoy them. The numbers of new cars and drivers tell their own story in the clogged streets of our cities, towns and villages. The new roads ensure that ever bigger trucks and containers can transport ever more goods to every corner of Ireland, and indeed some in the other direction. Winter sun tans, up until recently sported by the few, are now commonplace as many Irish people avail of year-round breaks, many in their own holiday homes in warmer climates. Then there is the health and beauty industry encompassing everything from hair-care to beauty treatments and cosmetic surgery, and the accompanying advertising leading us to believe that this is so normal and almost to wonder how we ever managed without it all. And this is not yet to consider shops and supermarkets, department stores and specialist health or food shops, and the vast amount of goods to be bought and sold – food, clothes, household goods, sports gear, music and videos, DVDs and the latest iPods. Fitness and Leisure Centres, theatres, cinemas and galleries, restaurants, pubs and clubs, offering many kinds of entertainment are all part of the wheels of the new wealth, with the sex industry accounting for a not inconsiderable proportion. Goods and choices abound. Are we at saturation point yet? How much is enough?

Our species is unique in its propensity to trade. We also are unique in the infinity of our desires. Most people feel that more income and more wealth is better than less, and this seems to apply with particular force to those who already have most. (After the Celtic Tiger, Clinch, Convery, Walsh, 2002.)
Thanks to this work from these three UCD professors, some simple economic facts about the new Ireland are made accessible to the non-expert reader. Total direct income increased by 61% over the five-year period to 2000. State transfer payments, for example, child benefit, increased by 11% for the same period. The top 10% of households in income terms spent on average over twice the national average expenditure of all households. For the lowest 10% of households expenditure was less than a quarter of the average for all households. The Central Statistics Office Gender Report, *Women and Men in Ireland 2004*, shows that one in four Irish women now run the risk of poverty, with female lone parents and older women particularly at risk. A 2004 ESRI report (Callan *et al*) shows relative income poverty rates in Ireland are considerably higher than the European Union average (though not as high as the USA). This has not changed with the years of increased wealth. Where is solidarity, Christian or other, in all of this? You don’t need to be an expert to work out that relatively the gap between the richest and poorest in our society is enormous. Leaving aside the devastating effects of the most recent natural disaster, you don’t have to be an international aid worker to know that this gap is even more evident between rich and poor nations. Who decides that this is acceptable and on what grounds? What values or guidelines are at the basis of such decisions?

It has been argued that in Ireland we are really in a catch-up situation relative to the rest of the pre-2004 EU member states. It is good that most of us in Ireland are finding out what it is like to enjoy material well-being. The fact is we have not just caught up but overtaken, in terms of private, individual consumption. Yet, already, there is a sense of slight unease. There are mutterings here and there about the affect of this new wealth on our society – that while it is mostly, it is not altogether, good. The number of people offering their services as volunteers in community and other social activities has dropped. People are too busy, too stressed, too exhausted to find time. There have been mutterings about breakdown or absence of community, a certain loss of
Irish friendliness, of the Irish welcome afforded to newcomers and visitors. There have been mutterings, some loud, about the fact that by no means does everyone in our society have a fair share in the goods of the new Ireland, that relatively speaking there are people who are worse off now than before. It has been noted that with all the improvement in living standards we are among the most economically unequal societies in Europe, with only the UK, Greece and Portugal being worse than us in this respect. The most recent European Values Study (1999-2000) shows some disturbing attitudes among us to this inequality. There is widespread desire that the basic needs of everyone be met, but this does not get translated into a wish to eliminate inequalities. The same study shows that, while considerably fewer Irish people than heretofore are attending church regularly, we still have a very high percentage who consider themselves religious and who attend church at least monthly. This raises some interesting issues in relation to solidarity and the teaching of the church, and suggests that Catholic social thought on solidarity is probably widely known and feeding into the decisions we are living with. But does this ring true? Or, is the social teaching indeed the Catholic Church’s best-kept secret?

Solidarity close to home

One of the striking features of Jon Sobrino’s reflection was the fact that, in authentic solidarity, the giver also receives. In thinking about the solidarity or lack of it extended to some of the new communities who have made their home in Ireland, the question of a shared vision arises. Do Irish Christians realise, for example, that a central tenet of Muslim faith shares many aspects of the Christian notion of solidarity and is an example of structural solidarity, which other groups, civic or religious, could well emulate? The Zakah is the third of the five pillars of Islam, without

which the faith is incomplete. It is understood as an obligatory act of worship of God, along with praying five times a day, fasting during Ramadan, and making pilgrimage, and is described sometimes as a religious tax. The root of the word signifies purification and it has taken on the sense of almsgiving, but this almsgiving has become quasi official and has been regulated by laws.

Zakah is a kind of tithe meant to support the poor, and those engaged in collecting it, and it has been a factor of solidarity and unity. It is based on the principle that the poor have a right to part of the property of the rich. This principle is stronger than that of a simple appeal to the generosity of those who have. The right of the needy is recognised formally in Qur’an 30, 38. ‘Give their right to the near of kin, to the needy, and to the wayfarers.’ Zakah is constantly mentioned alongside prayer as having been taught by all the prophets before Muhammad. Those who have given also will go to paradise.

The funds can be used to draw people to Islam or to protect the recent faith of others; to buy back slaves who have converted to Islam or Muslims fallen into slavery; to help those overwhelmed with debts to free themselves from their creditors, and for the wayfarer. (Surah 9:60)

For Muslims Zakah was an element in the process of re-establishing a new solidarity when the mercantile life of Mecca had broken up the ancient solidarity of the desert. The right to private property remains but the fact that the poor have rights over the property of the rich leads governments to redistribute property in the public interest.

‘And in their wealth is the right of the needy and of those deprived of the means of subsistence.’ (L1, 19) This Quranic injunction shows that the recipient of charity received it as a matter of right and not as dole.

In Catholic social teaching there is strong emphasis on the

dignity of the human person and on the notion of the universal destination of the goods of the earth (*Gaudium et Spes*, 1965), but there is something more in the structural solidarity of Islam where sharing, as opposed to charity which is also important in both faiths, is held at the same level as praying. It strikes me that reflecting on the distinction between charity and justice as a fundamental element in the notion of solidarity could well be a good starting point of shared learning, giving and receiving, between interested groups of Muslims and Catholics in Ireland – a means and a method of solidarity. Another area where there is much common ground between the two faiths is ecology. Catholic social thought and Islamic teaching on the right use of the goods of the earth and care and preservation of the environment start from a common base. All is from God, and we are co-creators or vice-regents. Humankind has a responsible and God-given role to play in creation as we hold the earth in trust. Christians and Muslims could find here also a means and method of solidarity with one another and with all life on the earth.

The tsunami disaster has evoked worldwide solidarity and we will need to rely on churches, government and the aid agencies to help us to maintain a committed, ongoing concern that will issue in new mutual understandings and a new kind of giving and receiving between the groups connected by this solidarity. It seems that solidarity in our society, with those very close to home, is much more difficult to build. It may be that the developing ethos of individualism will be challenged by the shock of the realisation that our hold on life is, after all, quite fragile, that we are interdependent and need each other, and that the life of each and every human person in our society is so precious as to warrant the very best care that the group as a whole can provide.

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