

The Spiritual Practice of Incarnational Solidarity

Joe Colletti, PhD

The underlying consideration concerning incarnational solidarity is three-fold: 1) if all is not well with others all is not well with you; 2) if all is not well with you then all is not well with others; and 3) if all is not well with you and others then all is not well with God. During a speech delivered at The National Cathedral, Washington, D.C., on March 31, 1968 Martin Luther King Jr. stated

"In a real sense all life is inter-related. All persons are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly affects all indirectly. I can never be what I ought to be until you are what you ought to be. And you can never be what you ought to be until I am what I ought to be. This is the inter-related structure of reality."

Within this framework, solidarity provides deep-rooted feelings of community and union. A strong sense of community is stressed through the idea that everyone is "caught in an inescapable network of mutuality" and a strong sense of union is emphasized through the belief that all persons are "tied in a single garment of destiny." Adding the Christian concept of incarnation within this context means that God is also part of the inescapable network of mutuality and intertwined within our single garment of destiny.

The Essence of Solidarity

An inescapable network of mutuality can be ignored but not eliminated. All of us share the physical and emotional fabric that make up our everyday lives. The physical fabric that makes up our private lives is primarily our home and the physical fabric that makes up our public lives include streets, sidewalks, buildings, and open spaces that all of us use every day. Privately, we live with family and friends and share meals, watch movies, play games, etc. Publicly, we drive alongside one another, walk past one another, work and shop among one another, and surround one another in the midst of parks, beaches, plazas, etc. for recreational and leisure purposes.

These private and public experiences bring us into contact with one another. As a result, we are often confronted with one another's living experiences. Some experiences are easier to embrace than others. Someone may be getting married, having a baby, working a great job, or going on a vacation.

Other experiences are not so easy to embrace. Someone may be experiencing alienation, loneliness, prejudice, discrimination, sickness, death, etc.

The essence of solidarity is rooted in mutual giving and receiving. Mutual giving and/or receiving amidst a celebration of a marriage, birth of a baby, working a great job together, or sharing a past vacation is a lot easier than mutually giving and/or receiving experiences of loneliness, discrimination, or sickness. Also, when we mutually give and/or receive an experience such as alienation it is not meant to be a one-time occurrence. It is meant to be an ongoing process. Thus, we become solid or whole with other persons which is the meaning of the Latin word —solidus from which the English word solidarity is taken.

The Essence of Incarnation

The core of the Christian doctrine of Incarnation is the union of God and humanity in the person of Jesus Christ. The starting place within the New Testament is the Annunciation which is recorded in the first chapter of the Gospel of Luke. The Annunciation is the revelation to Mary by the Angel Gabriel that she would conceive a child to be born the Son of God which would fulfill the prophecy of Isaiah (7.14) that a virgin (or maiden) would bear a son who would be called Immanuel ("God with us").

The passage in Luke notes that —the angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, you have found favor with God. You will be with child and give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High (verses 30 – 32)." The angel also said —The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you (verse 35) and Mary responded by saying —I am the Lord's servant and "May it be to me as you have said (verse 38)."

This encounter between the angel and Mary is understood within Christianity as the moment when the Holy Spirit of God descended and came to dwell among women and men. Later Christian writings and traditions have come to understand Mary as the archetype of all humanity. She sees herself as the Lord's servant and submits to the indwelling of God through the Holy Spirit.

For centuries, contemplatives have looked upon the attitude and words of Mary as multivalent. On the one hand, it relates to the salvific mystery that was initiated a couple of centuries ago. On the other hand, it relates to a continuing occurrence that has taken place within the body and heart of

Christian disciples since then. Like Mary, disciples of Christ are finite earthen vessels into which infinite divine life is poured. Thus, the one who created you is created in you.

The essence of incarnation is embedded in the indwelling of God through the Holy Spirit. Prior to his resurrection, Christ promised his disciples the Holy Spirit. In the 14 chapter of the Gospel of John, Jesus told his disciples that he —will ask the Father, and he will give you another Counselor to be with you forever—the Spirit of truth. The world cannot accept him, because it neither sees him nor knows him. But you know him, for he lives with you and will be in you (verses 16 – 17).|| Later in the chapter, Jesus is also quoted as saying —the Counselor, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you all things and will remind you of everything I have said to you (verse 26).||

The fulfillment of Christ's promises is narrated in the Book of Acts. In the first chapter, Jesus tells his disciples "Do not leave Jerusalem, but wait for the gift my Father promised, which you have heard me speak about. For John baptized with water, but in a few days you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit (verses 4 – 5)." The second chapter records the actual promise by noting that

—When the day of Pentecost came, they were all together in one place. Suddenly a sound like the blowing of a violent wind came from heaven and filled the whole house where they were sitting. —They saw what seemed to be tongues of fire that separated and came to rest on each of them. All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit . . . (verses 1 – 4).||

The Essence of Incarnational Solidarity

Incarnational solidarity is largely learned through —contact|| rather than through —concept.|| Concept means by theory or belief and contact means to touch physically, communicate with, and put into practice. Conceptually, as noted earlier in this paper, solidarity is steeped in the concepts of community and union and embedded in the acts of mutual giving and receiving. Conceptually, incarnation is embedded in the indwelling of God through the Holy Spirit which was promised by Christ to his disciples.

The essence of incarnational solidarity is learned through contact with those that make up our private and public lives. Through contact we learn about the many experiences that our family members, friends, co-workers, and

strangers have each day. These experiences can be difficult. They can consist of a family member's sickness, a friend's loss of a love one, a co-workers substance abuse problem, or a stranger's state of homelessness.

Incarnational solidarity is not only learning about the many experiences of other persons but encountering the experiences with them. After noting that we are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality and tied in a single garment of destiny, Martin Luther King Jr. emphasized that —Whatever affects one directly affects all indirectly¹¹ and he also emphasized that —I can never be what I ought to be until you are what you ought to be. And you can never be what you ought to be until I am what I ought to be. This is the inter-related structure of reality."

Therefore, incarnational solidarity is primarily learned through contact instead of concept. As we live out our private and public lives we can ignore the countless opportunities for us to be what we need to be in order for others to be what they ought to be and vice versa. However, these opportunities will not go away. If we so choose, incarnational solidarity will allow our spouse, friend, co-worker, and stranger to be who they ought to be and allow us to be the spouse, friend, co-worker, and stranger that we ought to be.

The inadequacies, hurts, pains, and injustices that we all experience actually become the means by which we become what we ought to be and others become what they ought to be. Finding healing in the midst of inadequacies, hurts, pains, and injustices is not only found within the sacred writings of Christianity but other spiritual traditions as well. In Christianity, the hurts, pains, suffering, and death of Jesus reveal the purpose of his existence which is resurrection, eternal life, and permanent healing.

Thus, as disciples of Christ we can stand in incarnational solidarity with others which means that not only are we standing with others but Christ is standing in the midst of us. Together, we can mourn someone's death, heal from a divorce, overcome the loss of a job, gain sobriety, and struggle to overcome a physical or mental disability. Until then, we can never be who we ought to be and others cannot be who they ought to be unless we live in the midst of an inter-related structure of reality that consists of mutual giving and receiving that leads to healing.

It is important to remember that incarnational solidarity goes beyond one-to-one experience. It is equally as important to stand in incarnational solidarity with groups of others which may be, geographically-speaking, as

large as a neighborhood, city, county, or country or, humanly-speaking, as large as a group of neighbors, residents of a city, or people of a larger region or country.

How can I be rich if my neighbor is poor? How can I experience equality if residents in my city are experiencing inequality? How can I not be hungry or be in health if people in another region or country are hungry or in poor health? Raising these questions often put us into a different type of relationship with others. It is not a direct one-to-one relationship but a one-to-many. It is a relationship that may or may not consist of direct contact initially but marked with empathy. Our empathy can result in feeling the intensity of other's woundedness. Also, empathy may lead us to a further step that moves us into direct contact with a larger group of others.

Whether we are in relationship with one individual or many, the underlying consideration as initially noted concerning incarnational solidarity is three-fold: 1) if all is not well with others all is not well with you; 2) if all is not well with you then all is not well with others; and 3) if all is not well with you and others then all is not well with God. The essence of incarnation is embedded in the indwelling of God through the Holy Spirit and the essence of solidarity which is rooted in mutual giving and receiving. Together, they merge when we open ourselves to the inadequacies, hurts, pains, and injustices of those persons who make up our private and public lives after realizing that we can never be who we ought to be until others are able to be who they ought to be and vice versa. This is the inter-related structure of our God-given reality.