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# What, for the University, is Solidarity?

## Catholic Higher Education and the Unfinished Reception of *Gaudium et Spes*

Susan Bigelow Reynolds

“Vatican II and Catholic Higher Education: Leading Forward”

Sacred Heart University

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I want to thank Michelle Loris for this invitation, and also the Catholic Studies faculty and Deanna Bradshaw and everyone involved in putting this conference together. I’m really delighted and privileged to be here and am so invigorated by this gathering.

Forty years ago, Jesuit philosopher and theologian Ignacio Ellacuría accepted an honorary doctorate from Santa Clara University and delivered a commencement address with which some of us here today are likely familiar.<sup>1</sup> In the concise and penetrating speech, Ellacuría proposed a vision of the university as both a center of intellectual inquiry and cultural production, and as a “social force”—a place concerned with the transformation of social reality.

Ellacuría had traveled to Santa Clara from the Universidad Centroamericana José Simeon Cañas in El Salvador, an institution named after the Salvadoran priest and congressman who fought for the abolition of slavery in Central America in 1824. By the time Ellacuría arrived at Santa Clara, El Salvador was three years into a brutal civil war that had already claimed the lives of Oscar Romero and Rutilio Grande and 30,000 others killed by army-backed right wing death squads. Between 1976 and 1980, Ellacuría recounted, the campus of the UCA been bombed ten times, raided by military groups, and threatened with termination of aid. Students and faculty had been exiled and even killed. “Our history,” Ellacuría stated, “has been that of our nation.” He went on:

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<sup>1</sup> Ignacio Ellacuría, S.J. Commencement Address, Santa Clara University, June 1982, <https://www.scu.edu/ic/programs/ignatian-worldview/ellacuria/>.

“But we also have been encouraged by the words of Archbishop Romero—himself so soon to be murdered. It was he who said, while we were burying an assassinated priest, that something would be terribly wrong in our Church if no priest lay next to so many of his assassinated brothers and sisters. If the University had not suffered, we would not have performed our duty. In a world where injustice reigns, a university that fights for justice must necessarily be persecuted.”<sup>2</sup>

Seven years later, Ellacuría would himself be murdered at the hands of the Salvadoran military, along with five other Jesuits, their housekeeper, and her daughter. Though Ellacuría is known for his contributions to liberationist philosophy and theology and his canon is vast, it's his brief 1982 commencement address that I find myself coming back to again and again. I often wonder what he would say to us today. Or rather, I wonder how *we* would respond if he were to issue to us the same challenge he placed before the Santa Clara community in June 1982. What *is* the role of the university in the face of injustice? How should we envision the task of a Catholic university in a world—*our* world—beset by threatened democracy, racial violence, planetary destruction, and violent nationalism bearing the name Christian? What does it mean, in *this* time and place, to propose, as Ellacuría did, that the mission of the university is **solidarity** with those who suffer injustice? What is the shape of such solidarity? **Beside whom should *we* hope to be buried?**

I imagine that this sort of provocation would summon from the likes of us gathered in this room earnest professions of our most high-minded convictions. But in reality, these are not simple questions for us to answer, even hypothetically. There are at least three challenges I see in discerning the meaning of solidarity for the university today.

First, the modern corporate university is governed by tensions that militate against the possibility of solidarity with the poor. We might call these “signs of the times.” The astronomical cost of college tuition and the student debt crisis not only pose economic problems but also pedagogical and spiritual ones. It is hard to extoll for students the virtues of what Jesuit Dean Brackley called downward mobility and then send them a tuition bill for \$75,000. Tuition costs for students and

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<sup>2</sup> Ellacuría, Commencement Address

the sub-living wages paid to many campus workers at Catholic and secular universities alike preclude the participation of the poor in the ecology of the university. Meanwhile, the gradual dissolution and adjunctification of the humanities (including and especially theology) at many of our universities has led to the devaluation of the labor of those who would otherwise be most invested in guiding this sort of institutional examination of conscience. Such precarity makes solidarity difficult to build and nearly impossible to maintain.

Meanwhile, we've witnessed the insinuation of the corporate lexicon into higher education, transposing deep questions of mission into grammars of innovation and vague notions of human flourishing. In the name of expanding access to higher education, we've seen the rapid growth of virtual and hybrid degree programs, particularly since the pandemic. Yet it's worth noting how readily virtual learning can be coopted to serve this corporate telos—the substitution of patient, sustained engagement with TED Talk-style distillations; the flattening of diverse forms of knowledge into “content;” the reduction of student formation to metrics. Meanwhile, relentless expansion means that universities are ever more accountable to donors. Preserving and expanding institutional brand identity does not naturally lend itself to prophetic side-choosing. Sacrifice is not a value-add.

The second challenge in taking up Ellacuría's call today is the tendency toward misplaced perceptions of persecution. I have no doubt that many concerned with the future of Catholic higher education would readily agree with Ellacuría that “in a world where injustice reigns, a university that fights for justice must necessarily be persecuted.” But whose persecution, and which injustice? The culture wars have offered attractive cover to those scared of the wrong things. Within this battle for cultural control, Catholic identity becomes just another weapon to be wielded—withdrawn to slay ideological enemies, returned to its scabbard before it has a chance to cut both ways. Such an approach muddles our discernment of true injustice *and* of ourselves as moral agents.

To be clear, these challenges aren't wholly new. Ellacuría's plea was no less radical in 1982 than it would be today. Latin America during the 1970s and '80s was a testing ground for political and economic theories developed at American universities, often in symbiosis with multinational

corporations and the U.S. military and state department. Throughout Latin America, such interventions created or exacerbated radical economic inequality, fomented the rise of repressive regimes, and were uniformly catastrophic for the poor. Hence Ellacuría's urging that American universities, especially Catholic universities, use their power for good—in his words, “to ensure that the unavoidable presence of the United States in Central America be sensitive and just.”<sup>3</sup> Ellacuría ultimately calls in the speech for something akin to what David Hollenbach termed *intellectual solidarity*, a call that was radical then and remains radical now.<sup>4</sup>

Yet it's a third challenge that I want to invite us to unpack this afternoon. Ellacuría's call is difficult for us to grasp, I would argue, because of the fragmentary and unfinished reception of *Gaudium et Spes* in the U.S. ecclesial context. While the effects of Vatican II, and *Gaudium et Spes* in particular, on the self-actualization of the church in Latin America forms the foundation of Latin American liberation theology, the United States still lacks a what we might call a “poor people's history” of the Council and its reception. (For what it's worth, I think this is also why American Catholics on both sides of the ideological divide do not fully “get” Pope Francis.) Indeed, as our colleague Massimo Faggioli has written, while “Vatican II happened in Rome, the council was transacted... largely by the Church's margins.”<sup>5</sup> In the U.S. Catholic context, nearly six decades of reflection on the council and its outcomes have produced surprisingly little ecclesiological reflection on **what the council's vision of solidarity means for the church *ad intra***, within itself. For communities on the margins, however, the council's espousal of **solidarity as an ecclesial virtue** was among its most important legacies.<sup>6</sup> We can define solidarity as sustained, creative, often costly pattern of morally inflected action and commitment across difference, motivated by love, justice, and concern for the common good. Solidarity is the

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<sup>3</sup> Ellacuría, Commencement Address, 1982

<sup>4</sup> David Hollenbach, *The Common Good and Christian Ethics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 137-170.

<sup>5</sup> Massimo Faggioli, “Vatican II and the Church of the Margins,” *Theological Studies* 74, no. 4 (2013): 816.

<sup>6</sup> Meghan J. Clark argues that solidarity should be understood as a social virtue: “Anatomy of a Social Virtue: Solidarity and Corresponding Vices,” *Political Theology* 15, no. 1 (2014): 26–39. I have drawn the phrase “ecclesial virtue” from three sources: Gerard Mannion, who proposes “virtue ecclesiology” to support the work of ecumenism and the cultivation of a compelling pastoral vision; and Paul Lakeland and Richard R. Gaillardetz, both of whom propose humility as an ecclesial virtue. See Gerard Mannion, *Ecclesiology and Postmodernity: Questions for the Church in Our Time* (Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical Press, 2007), 198, 230; Paul Lakeland, “‘I Want to be in That Number’: Desire, Inclusivity, and the Church,” *CTSA Proceedings* 66 (2011): 16–28; and Richard R. Gaillardetz, *An Unfinished Council: Vatican II, Pope Francis, and the Renewal of Catholicism* (Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical Press, 2015), 73–158.

concrete work of joining that the ideal of communion demands—it is practiced kinship, the act of piety for the presence of God in the reality of the other. To understand solidarity as an ecclesial virtue is to see it an orienting moral force for the renewal of relationships, practices, and structures **within** the church as well as beyond it.

So this afternoon I'd like to invite us to spend a moment considering what resources the council's understanding of solidarity might offer us as we imagine the task of Catholic higher education in our fractured world.

## **Solidarity and the Unfinished Reception of *Gaudium et Spes***

In his opening address to the second session of Vatican II, Pope Paul VI declared his desire that the council become a “spring awakening of the immense spiritual and moral energy latent within the heart of the church.” The time had come, the pope counseled the thousands gathered in St. Peter's Basilica, for the church to offer “a more thoughtful definition of herself.” In “faithful adherence to the words and thoughts of Christ,” the task before them was to “clarify the conscience of the church.”<sup>7</sup> **For Catholics in the United States**, the church's examination of conscience could hardly have come at a more consequential time. The civil rights movement had brought questions of freedom, justice, human dignity, and institutional authority squarely into the center of the public sphere. Beginning in 1964, the War on Poverty would reorient people's perceptions of urban life and economic justice, and in fact shape in profound and largely unacknowledged ways the reception of Vatican II in American cities.<sup>8</sup> By the time the council concluded in December 1965, its concern for social justice, embrace of local cultures and vernaculars, support for ecumenical and interreligious dialogue, and clarion call to scrutinize the signs of the times in light of the Gospel marked a formal end to the magisterium's adversarial

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<sup>7</sup> “Solemn Opening of the Second Session of the Second Vatican Ecumenical Council, Address by His Holiness Paul VI,” September 29, 1963, [https://www.vatican.va/content/paul-vi/es/speeches/1963/documents/hf\\_p-vi\\_spe\\_19630929\\_concilio-vaticano-ii.html](https://www.vatican.va/content/paul-vi/es/speeches/1963/documents/hf_p-vi_spe_19630929_concilio-vaticano-ii.html). Translation from Latin and Spanish versions of the text my own.

<sup>8</sup> On the relationship between the civil rights movement and Vatican II, see Joseph P. Chinnici, *American Catholicism Transformed: From the Cold War Through the Council* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2021), 84–104; and McGreevy, “Racial Justice and the People of God,” 221–54.

stance toward the modern world. Shifts propelled by the council effectively softened the borderlines around and within the church: between God and believers, church and secular world, Europe and the global church, clergy and laity, Catholics and those of other faiths, and among the faithful themselves. This profound reconfiguration of ecclesial borders recast relationships within and beyond the church as infused with the potential for dialogue rather than defense. At the conclusion of the council, Paul VI likened its spiritual and pastoral sensibility to the parable of the good Samaritan (Lk 10:25–37): “A feeling of boundless sympathy has permeated the whole of it,” he declared. “The attention of our council has been absorbed by the discovery of human needs.”<sup>9</sup> Like the Samaritan in the parable, the council had assumed a stance of mercy—a willingness to see and unite itself to the wounds of humanity.

In *Gaudium et Spes*, the council fundamentally reconceived the moral status of the world and in so doing reimagined and re-narrated the relationship between the world and the church.

Underwriting this relationship was both an understanding of mission as “**ecclesial presence in the world**”<sup>10</sup> (as Ormond Rush put it) and a vision of solidarity in which laity were primary agents. The striking preface of *Gaudium et Spes* became agenda-setting language for the church after the council. In professing the church’s desire to draw near to the “joys and hopes, the grief and anguish” of humanity, *Gaudium et Spes* called the church to “deep solidarity with the human race and its history” (GS 1).<sup>11</sup>

The council’s vision of solidarity was the culmination of a notion that had been evolving in papal writing and ecclesial practice for seven decades. Leo XIII’s *Rerum Novarum* (1891) introduced the idea of solidarity into the social doctrine of the church. Though the term itself does not appear, its roots are present conceptually in the encyclical’s support for the rights and dignity of

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<sup>9</sup> Quoted by Ormond Rush, *The Vision of Vatican II* (Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical Press, 2019), 221.

<sup>10</sup> Rush, *The Vision of Vatican II*, 225.

<sup>11</sup> Throughout this book, I primarily rely on Austin Flannery, OP’s translations of *Gaudium et Spes* and *Lumen Gentium*. Flannery, Austin, ed. *Vatican Council III: Constitutions, Decrees, and Declarations: The Basic Sixteen Documents* (Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical Press, 1996), 1–96, 163–282. The Vatican translation of GS 1 uses the phrase “the deepest of bonds” rather than solidarity, which I believe conveys a similar sentiment. See “Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World: *Gaudium et Spes*,” December 7, 1965, 1, [https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist\\_councils/ii\\_vatican\\_council/documents/vat-ii\\_const\\_19651207\\_gaudium-et-spes\\_en.html](https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19651207_gaudium-et-spes_en.html).

workers and the promotion of the common good.<sup>12</sup> Forty years later, Pius XI's *Quadragesimo Anno* reiterated and expanded the notion of the common good and the call for cooperative membership in the human family. During this period, European schools of thought including German solidarism and personalism influenced papal commitment to solidarity as a moral, social, and economic obligation.<sup>13</sup> A robust sense of social solidarity—both between social classes and between lay and ordained—also undergirded the praxis of many of the Catholic movements that emerged during the early twentieth century, from the worker priests of France to the social projects of Jesuit Alberto Hurtado in Chile, from Belgian Cardinal Joseph Cardijn's Young Christian Workers to the Catholic Worker movement of Dorothy Day and Peter Maurin in the United States. As the work of the council unfolded, solidarity was simultaneously becoming an explicit centerpiece of papal writings. A succession of social encyclicals—John XXIII's *Mater et Magistra* (1961) and *Pacem in Terris* (1963) and Paul VI's *Populorum Progressio* (1967)—developed and refined the moral demands of solidarity in the realms of human rights, war and peace, international relations, human development, and economic justice.<sup>14</sup>

If solidarity describes the council's relational vision, then dialogue was its praxic corollary.<sup>15</sup> In council documents, dialogue has two senses. First, it denotes the concrete practice of intentional communication among two different parties aimed at deeper understanding. In a more capacious sense, however, the council uses the notion of dialogue to signify a disposition of openness to the gift of the other—a spirit of warmth, mutual exchange, and friendship. In the words of French

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<sup>12</sup> Reacting to socialism and Marxism, *Rerum Novarum* rejects the idea that the poor should take political action to change their situation by force, encouraging instead union among the classes in friendship and brotherly love (RN 25). See Steinar Stjernø, *Solidarity in Europe: The History of An Idea* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 65.

<sup>13</sup> See Gerald J. Beyer, "The Meaning of Solidarity in Catholic Social Teaching," *Political Theology* 15, no. 1 (2014): 13.

<sup>14</sup> For a probing examination of the still-unfinished development of the notion of solidarity in Catholic social thought, see Anna Rowlands, *Towards a Politics of Communion: Catholic Social Teaching in Dark Times* (London: T&T Clark, 2021), 329–267. Rowlands emphasizes that the political language of solidarity "is itself a migration and secularization of a previously Christian set of ideas" (240); the political notion of solidarity migrated back into the ecclesial lexicon, as it were, as Catholic social doctrine developed.

<sup>15</sup> James McEvoy, *Leaving Christendom for Good: Church-World Dialogue in a Secular Age* (Lanham, Md.: Lexington Books, 2014), 74, quoted in Rush 255: Dialogue is the council's "fundamental metaphor in interpreting the church-world relationship." Similarly, Bradford Hinze argues, "Vatican II laid the groundwork for a dialogical approach to the church's internal and external relations." See Hinze, *Practices of Dialogue in the Roman Catholic Church* (New York: Continuum, 2006), 4.



Dominican theologian Marie-Dominique Chenu, a theological advisor at the council, dialogue carried with it a

whole wealth of meaning: recognition of the other as other, loving others as they are and not as people to be won over, accepting that they are different from me, without trying to encroach on their consciences and on their searching, without asserting my reservations before I give my trust.<sup>16</sup>

Conciliar documents explicitly call for dialogue when describing the interaction of the Catholic church with the world beyond itself: with other Christians and faith traditions, with the social and natural sciences, and with the modern world in general.<sup>17</sup> Yet a spirit of dialogue in the second, more expansive sense is the through-line in virtually every meaningful relationship the council takes up—even the foundational relationship between God and humanity. *Dei Verbum* portrays revelation as God’s ongoing dialogue (*colloquium*) with the church: “God, who spoke in the past, continues to converse [*colloquitur*] with the spouse of his beloved Son” (DV 8). Reading this passage with Chenu’s understanding of dialogue in mind renders its use of familial language for Christ and the church striking. God speaks to the church with the same intimacy one feels when talking with a daughter around the kitchen table. Seen in this light, tradition becomes the church’s family story, the Holy Spirit its guardian. This divine-human conversation called revelation is the basis for other dialogical relationships within the church: for collegiality among bishops (LG 23), collaboration among lay and ordained (*Apostolicam Actuositatem* 10, 20), and “mutual esteem, reverence, and harmony” among all believers in their diversity (GS 92).

To center dialogue as a metaphor for the church’s internal and external relationships, then, was to abandon in a gentle yet definitive way the defensiveness that had long characterized the church’s stance toward the world. Indeed, Vatican II refashioned the relationship between the church and world by first redefining the meaning of “the world.” In *Gaudium et Spes*, the council clarifies that:

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<sup>16</sup> Marie-Dominic Chenu, quoted in Guiseppe Alberigo, “Transition to a New Age,” 589n37; quoted in Rush, *The Vision of Vatican II*, 254.

<sup>17</sup> Hinze, *Practices of Dialogue in the Roman Catholic Church*, 4.

The world which the council has in mind is *the world of [people], the entire human family* seen in its total environment. It is the world as the theatre of human history, bearing the marks of its travail, its triumphs and failures. It is the world which Christians believe has been *created and is sustained by the love of its maker...* (GS 2; emphasis mine)

Prior to the council, a sense of mutual exclusivity governed the church-world relationship. In a clear contrast to previous understandings, *Gaudium et Spes* begins by recognizing that the church is not only *in* the world but also *with, for,* and even to some extent *of* the world in its own humanity and historicity.<sup>18</sup> The church is people—the same people who dwell in the world of everyday life, rife with its disappointments and injustices, its beauty and potential for transformation.

As we know, Vatican II was distinct from councils that preceded it in that it explicitly embraced historical consciousness, a sense of its own situatedness in history, and an acknowledgment of the evolutionary nature of institutions, traditions, texts, and doctrines.<sup>19</sup> For the council, historical consciousness was not limited to a more robust sense of tradition and the past, captured by its method of *ressourcement*, nor even to its recognition of the need to respond to the unique exigencies of the present, as in the animating notion of *aggiornamento*. Historicity also disclosed a sense of the **future**—both the eschatological future and the ordinary and more immediate earthly future, infused with the possibility of liberation. The sense of hope and imagination that

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<sup>18</sup> In contrast to the *societas perfecta* notion, *Gaudium et Spes* acknowledges the church's dependence on the world: "Whoever contributes to the development of the human community on the level of family, culture, economic and social life, and national and international politics, according to the plan of God, is also contributing in no small way to the community of the church insofar as it depends on things outside itself" (GS 44). An aim of the council, according to Yves Congar, "is a full recognition of the historicity of the world and of the Church itself which, though distinct from the world, is nonetheless bound up with it. Movements in the world must have their echo in the Church, at least to the extent that they raise problems." Quoted by Rush, *The Vision of Vatican II*, 176, fn 50.

<sup>19</sup> Rush 165ff; John O'Malley, S.J., "Reform, Historical Consciousness, and Vatican II's *Aggiornamento*," *Theological Studies* 32, no. 4 (1971): 573–601. O'Malley identifies several different, sometimes competing modes of historical thinking at play throughout the council (590–95). On the council's acknowledgment of the influence of evolutionary theory on its conception of nature and time, see GS 5 and Leo J. Donovan, "Was Vatican II Evolutionary? A Note on Conciliar Language," *Theological Studies* 36, no. 3 (1975): 493–502.

followed from Vatican II were in many ways reflections of its historical consciousness—the idea that the church could change, because it already had.

Following from this newly articulated historical consciousness, the council evinced on behalf of the church a self-conscious awareness of its own capacity to listen and be moved by the recognition of human needs. The call to read the signs of the times was not about gaining content knowledge of current events to add a veneer of relevance to preaching or ministry. Nor did it point to the mere application of preexisting doctrines to new circumstances. Rather, as Ormond Rush points out, it constituted a deep theological principle, one bound up with the council's expansive notion of revelation: “The God who has spoken within history *in the past* speaks in a new way *in the present*, because the historical conditions of the present are different from the conditions of the past. Through these historical dimensions of human existence, God is teaching the church new things about the meaning of the Gospel *for this time and place*. To discern what God is saying, the church needs to understand ‘the world of today.’”<sup>20</sup> The church's dialogue with the world is inseparable from its dialogue with God. Outside the world, there is no revelation: The church's very mission depends on willingness to see the Spirit at work in the world. Dialogue with the world is not only an act of love for that world; properly conceived, it is also an act of love for God.

While solidarity is a hallmark of *Gaudium et Spes*, more rarely is it considered in its relationship to the local church. Yet considering *Gaudium et Spes* and *Lumen Gentium* in tandem discloses deep resonances between the language of solidarity in the former and the notion of peoplehood in the latter. The motif of peoplehood permeates conciliar documents. In *Gaudium et Spes*, a relational theological anthropology and communitarian vision of society undergird its vision of mission (e.g., GS 23–25). *Lumen Gentium*, too, portrays salvation relationally, as God's desire to “make women and men holy and to save them, not as individuals without any bond between them, but rather to make them into a people who might acknowledge him and serve him in holiness” (LG 9). For the council, holiness has a fundamentally communal character. Even the Incarnation is described as an act of solidarity, as Jesus “[taking] his place in human society” (GS 32). Jesus did not merely become an individual; he became a member of a community, a

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<sup>20</sup> Rush, *The Vision of Vatican II*, 179, emphasis in the original; referencing *Dei Verbum* 8.

person who, like all people, was woven into the fabric of a particular family in a particular place and time. In so doing, Jesus sanctified the ties that bind ordinary human life. The image of the church as the people of God, then, accents the fundamentally communal characters of holiness and salvation.

In the years immediately following the council's conclusion, **it became clear that the council's vision-in-germ of ecclesial solidarity was among its most consequential outcomes for the world church.** The 1968 CELAM (Latin American Episcopal Conference) gathering in Medellín, Colombia, convened in order to interpret the meaning of Vatican II for Latin America, introduced the preferential option for the poor into magisterial thought. The 1971 Synod of Bishops, whose theme was "Justice in the World," concluded that work on behalf of social justice and the transformation of the world was "a constitutive dimension of the preaching of the Gospel" and of "the Church's mission for the redemption of the human race and its liberation from every oppressive situation."<sup>21</sup> The theme of solidarity would come to define, albeit in different ways, the papacies of both John Paul II and Francis.

Given the social and historical and existential contexts within which Vatican II unfolded, and the myriad transformations that followed, one would expect to find that the theological notion of solidarity had become the foundation for decades of robust reflection on questions of power and difference in the church. Since Vatican II, few questions have so occupied the attention of church scholars as that of the relationship between ecclesial unity and cultural diversity. Yet in this search for theological and practical possibilities, solidarity has been curiously neglected. Within the United States, the council's call to solidarity beckoned Catholics to concern for largely distant others—the poor and oppressed around the world, and so on—but with notable exceptions, it did not have much of an effect on the way that Catholics viewed the racial, ethnic, and economic borderlines *within* their immediate communities. Theologically, solidarity assumed a starring role in Catholic social thought and ethics, but it did not enter the postconciliar **ecclesiological** lexicon with the same force.

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<sup>21</sup> World Synod of Catholic Bishops, *Justicia in Mundo* (Justice in the World), 1971, §6.

Instead, leading voices largely approached questions of difference through the language of communion, particularly after 1985. Communion ecclesiology, for its various merits, has proven curiously unable to take seriously questions of difference and power, offering instead a quixotic but nebulous vision of unity in diversity. I want to suggest that Catholic colleges and universities have a vital role to play in recovering solidarity not only as an ethical principle but as a theological one, a principle that might help to guide *our* discernment of the times in light of the Gospel.

### **What does GS's notion of solidarity mean for the Catholic university?**

Here we can return to the question posed to us by Ignacio Ellacuría: **Beside whom should we hope to be buried?**

Given higher education's vaunted state of permanent crisis, such talk of burial plots is not particularly comforting. This crisis asks, perpetually, "Whence comes our salvation?"

Solidarity is a soteriological category. That is, to speak of solidarity is to make implicit claims about the nature and locus of salvation. Solidarity takes as its orienting truth the recognition that, in the words of Martin Luther King, Jr., "[W]e are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny." Solidarity calls forth the recognition that all struggles for justice and liberation are interconnected, giving rise to unlikely partnerships. The privileged, meanwhile, learn to view structures of sin and domination not as problems to be dealt with by their victims but rather as forces that dehumanize their beneficiaries as well and thus degrade the entire social fabric of the community. In this way, solidarity is both an affective orientation and a sustained practice motivated from two directions: empathy for and indignation at the undeserved suffering of others, and the desire for personal conversion from apathy and complicity to responsibility, community, and love. On some level, undertaking the costly, inefficient, painstaking work of reorienting one's life and the social structures within which one exists toward the flourishing of the community only makes sense if one believes genuinely that her soul hangs in the balance. Ironically, this self-orientation serves the productive end of

alleviating the privileged from the desire to play moral savior to the poor. Here, the oft-cited words of Aboriginal elder and activist Lilla Watson offer a helpful mantra: “If you have come to help me, you are wasting your time. If you have come because your liberation is bound up with mine, then let us work together.”

Ellacuría offers the shape of a method whereby we might discern our particular task. We must begin, he says, by looking at the specific historical reality within which we are immersed. At the UCA, such history was that of the rural poor, situated within a hemispheric reality of political repression, land dispossession, and radical economic stratification. The task of historical analysis facing our own institutions is in many ways doubly complicated, because it involves facing histories in which our own institutions are implicated, and not always admirably. (The UCA had only been founded in 1965—a Vatican II university like Sacred Heart.) The word is overused, but “reckoning” is an apt term for this task, which involves not only the analysis of preestablished facts but also the courage to uncover untold stories, to face reality nondefensively, to allow it to affect us, to repent.

In my context, at Emory University in Atlanta, Georgia (which is a Methodist university, not a Catholic one), this work of late has involved reckoning with centuries of chattel slavery in South, with the legacy of wealth amassed by white enslavers and their beneficiaries, with the Native peoples conquered and displaced so that settlers could claim the land upon which the university is now built. It has involved attending to the horrors of lynching and scrutinizing the names that adorn buildings and endowed chairs, and it has involved many other things as well. Catholic universities such as Georgetown have helped to set a standard for such efforts, imperfect though they may be.

But for Ellacuría this scrutiny is not confined to the remembered past. Historical analysis should rather propel our mission in the present and shape our vision of the future. Though the council’s call to scrutinize the signs of the times is in many ways an overused trope, I think we undersell how difficult this task actually is: as all Monday morning quarterbacks know, it is always easier to read the past than the present, to critique the shortcomings and blind spots and variegated

hypocrisies of those who came before us then to put on the heavy mantle of costly moral decision making ourselves.

Solidarity intervenes in the neoliberal fantasy of unbridled growth and relentless productivity. The uncritical adoption of the corporate lexicon into higher education insinuates us into its implicit telos—a telos of which I would like to suggest we have reason to be suspicious. To view the rhetorical hegemony of innovation with suspicion is to refuse, or at least to refute, the rose-colored narrative of progress that runs like a spring beneath the colonialist distortions that deform our apprehensions of history and the present. In such a refusal, we find the paradox at the heart of the Christian life: our salvation comes from our willingness to give ourselves away to those the world regards as least deserving of such sacrifice—to refuse any metric of excellence that does not first ask, **“To whom is this work accountable?”** The real question is whether that’s an answer we want to hear.