Whatever happened to solidarity?

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Prime Minister David Cameron's negotiations for a 'better deal for Britain' in Europe are dominating the headlines this week, but discussions that focus solely on what EU reform would achieve for Britain do not reflect a commitment to solidarity, one of the foundations of Catholic Social Teaching. Patrick Riordan SJ considers what solidarity involves and why it seems to be lacking in responses to two major contemporary crises.

'International solidarity is a requirement of the moral order; world peace depends in part upon this.'[1] A contemporary review of relationships within and between nations suggests that there has been a failure to embrace this principle of solidarity, whose importance is stated definitively in the Catechism of the Catholic Church. When we consider the requirements that the principle places on individuals and institutions, the extent to which it is absent in today's world becomes even clearer – as does the need for a renewed commitment to it. But why is commitment to solidarity so difficult to achieve?

Appeals to solidarity provide us with typical examples of the problem of external reasons as outlined by Bernard Williams. Simply formulated, the problem is that no one can be motivated to act by being presented with a reason from without unless they are already motivated in some way to act on the relevant concern. If they are already motivated, it is because they have an internal reason, a reason of their own, to act, and to do what is required.[2] Without such an internal reason a pious sermon, a heartfelt exhortation, a call to arms, will have no effect in moving people to action. However, the faithful believer, the committed philanthropist, the patriotic citizen, already has such internal reasons and so can be mobilised. The stimulus from without resonates with their own – possibly dormant – motivation.

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The call to love one's neighbour as oneself will fall on deaf ears unless the hearer already has a motive to be benevolent towards others; the challenge to give up smoking for the sake of health will have no effect unless the smoker wants to stop. So it is that in the current crises, those who invoke 'solidarity' in the context of humanitarian appeals on behalf of migrants fleeing from war and poverty are astonished to find their appeals have such little effect. Similarly, cosmopolitans arguing for a world community in which the rights of every single person should be upheld as urgently as the rights of any other are surprised when their appeals to our shared humanity and the values formerly celebrated as 'fraternité' and the 'brotherhood of man' are ineffectual. So much so that frustrated representatives of the cosmopolitan cause resort to guilt as the reliable motive which could mobilise support for the cause.[3]

The distinction between internal and external reasons, and the associated thesis that no external reason can motivate to action unless there is already an internal reason which it can latch onto, can seem plausible in light of the frustrating failures to persuade. On the other hand, this seems to amount to a counsel of despair, against the key insight of European history that persuasion and the stronger argument can provide us with means to handle our conflicts without violence.

Both Aristotle and John Stuart Mill, in their different centuries and situations, seemed to acknowledge the difficulty and they both found the answer in the formation of character. Aristotle was of the opinion that all his reflections on ethics could only make sense to well-brought-up young people. Without prior formation of good character, as ensured in a domestic and community context, the philosophical analysis of the good and virtuous life would be meaningless and could not on its own serve to make people good.[4] Similarly Mill, in formulating his demanding ethical system of utilitarianism, saw the major dilemma of how anyone supposedly devoted to pursuing her own happiness could make it her concern to work for the happiness of everyone, and not just intimately connected others. Again his solution is in terms of prior formation: just as well brought-up young people are horrified at the occurrence of crime, so they could learn to be horrified at the neglect of the general happiness.[5]

In other words, one solution to the problem of non-motivating external reasons is to ensure that in the formation of their character people are helped to develop the required internal reasons which can be their source of motivation when confronted with challenging demands to their private interests. This is a plausible solution to some extent, but not completely satisfactory, because it leaves us with the disjunction between the two kinds of reasons. Another approach, that allowed for by Williams himself, is to acknowledge that external reasons can indeed be motivating if there is some 'sound deliberative path' from the agent's own internal reasons to the course of action required by the external reasons. So for instance in the extreme example of the smoker called upon to quit, the doctor can invoke the patient's own desires to be healthy and to enjoy retirement with friends and family, but that these reasonable goals will be jeopardised by potential illness brought on by continuing heavy smoking. The sound deliberative route exists and can be invoked; but as experience shows, there can be still be a failure to take the required action.

These two ideas, the prior formation of character, and the sound deliberative route, provide us with two distinct but related lines of thought in relation to two major crises of our day in which a lack of solidarity is evident and appeals to solidarity are relatively unsuccessful: the flight from Syria, and the exposed fragility of the European Union. There is the humanitarian challenge of dealing with the millions of people driven from Syria by the war, and the failure of the international community and in particular the European Union to find a manageable way of dealing with their obligations under the *Convention relating to the Status of Refugees* (1951). Their fumbling has empowered criminals to profit by the trafficking of people; the absence of a reliable and regulated system for processing the asylum seekers and others has motivated people from many other countries such as Afghanistan, Iraq and the Balkan states to ride on the wave of migration to improve their own life chances; and all of this has burdened the least well-resourced states of the Union with the principal task of dealing with the waves of desperate people risking life to get to Europe. The closure of borders, which the Schengen Agreement had succeeded in opening to facilitate the free movement of people within Europe, marked the crisis for the Union's self-understanding. Under pressure from the crises the social-democratic consensus which has enabled Europe to find common ground and common solutions is evaporating and giving way to a resurgence of nationalisms and right-wing politics, rising on a tide of fear.

Faced with these problems the two questions of solidarity arise: where is the solidarity of European populations with the suffering fellow men and women and children of the Middle East? And where is the solidarity of member states of the European Union with one another? As noted, the two ideas of the prior formation of character and the sound deliberative route permit us lines of reflection. How does the United Kingdom stand in relation to the twin solidarities?

Insofar as the political leadership of the UK has contributed to the formation of character among the British electorate it has consistently been in a direction guaranteed to undermine solidarity. Typically our politicians repeat the mantra 'Best for Britain' in advocating or defending policy, and so it is no wonder if over the course of time not only the required rhetoric of debate but also the mind-set of voters is formed and conditioned to accept no other line of thought than to calculate what is in our own interests, what is best for Britain. So when immigration is debated, that famous issue on which all parties seek to outdo one another in being tough and resolute,[6] the

only permissible argument available for welcoming migrants is that 'we', the British economy, need the personnel in our health service, in the transport and catering industries, and to ensure that our top universities, banks, and manufacturers can recruit the best in the world. For our benefit.

Of course there is always a degree of validity in considering one's own interests, whether as an individual or as a nation, but it is not inevitable that this be the only way of thinking about what might be done and what ought to be done. Along with the widening of interests that comes with the formation of character there is also the possibility of a sound deliberative route from our interests, our internal reasons, to comprehend a bigger picture and acknowledge more demanding obligations. The British political culture is now suffering from the protracted failure of politicians to provide that sound deliberative route to explain and justify the project of the European Union to their electorate. As visitors from other European countries often remark, in London you seldom see the flag of the European Union displayed alongside the Union Jack. This reflects the fact that despite the many occasions on which Parliament agreed to various treaties and committed the United Kingdom to the common venture, the political establishment has never been concerned to explain and defend the European idea and ideals. It has only been possible to make the argument in terms of Britain's interests, and never also in terms of the interests of Europe as a whole and the wider global concerns for peace and prosperity. No sound deliberative route has been offered to make plausible to people the value of European Union membership, and hence a reinforcement of character which would have enabled people to see the point and support relevant policies has also been lacking.

Winston Churchill, in arguing for the *European Convention for the Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms* (1950) after the war, did not focus on what was best for Britain, but what was best for the peoples of Europe and indeed the world. The need to prevent a recurrence of the abuses of state power as experienced in Europe in the twentieth century and to protect individuals of all nations against the violation of their rights in the name of national security or other such values was of course also applicable to the people of Britain. But while the

Convention is not perfect, being a child of its time and therefore limited in its perspective, the attitude of some present-day politicians who can see in it only a frustration of the British State's freedom to act as it chooses in the national interest would be abhorrent to Churchill. When wondering about how such changes in political culture can have come about, we can be obliged to admit a failure to form the character of our citizens appropriately, and a failure to provide the explanation, the story, which would allow people to see the point and appreciate the goodness of what has been inherited in such institutions and structures as the Convention on the Status of Refugees.

Pope John Paul II stressed that solidarity is not a vague feeling of compassion but a firm commitment to the common good.[7] It was not a vague feeling of compassion with actual or potential victims of oppression which motivated Churchill, but a firm commitment to put in place the kinds of institutional safeguards which would both protect potential victims and give them the opportunity of redress in the event of their being victimised. Of course feelings of compassion with those who suffer, who are desperately in need of help, express the kinds of internal reasons which give individuals motives to act, and they are to be encouraged and fostered. But the kinds of action which may result should not be thought of only as response to immediate need, the kind of emergency aid which helps in the short term. Actions are also needed to create and support the institutions and structures which will safeguard against the recurrence of crises and maintain the processes for coping fairly and humanely with the many who legitimately seek a new home and a better life for themselves.

Those of us who hold solidarity to be a key term in our scale of values will have to make greater efforts to trace the sound deliberative route which will allow our hearers to grasp and understand that what is asked of them is firmly rooted in their own value systems and is not an imposition from without. The arguments we will have to use may be religious and theological but they will also have to be secular since the common good at stake is not restricted to believers but is a good for all men and women, the good of living in a world order in which peace and stability are secured and the rights of everyone are guaranteed. This ideal will have to be translated into the institutions and structures which will include improved

versions of the Convention on Refugees and the European Convention on Human Rights. For this we have to make it clear to our political representatives that our solidarity with suffering humanity requires of them to make the effort to build and maintain those institutions and not only and always complain about them for not being Best for Britain.

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[1] *Catechism of the Catholic Church* §1941.

[2] Bernard Williams, 'Internal and External Reasons', in B. Williams, *Moral Luck: Philosophical Papers 1973-1980* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981) pp. 101-113.

[3] Andrew Dobson, 'Thick Cosmopolitanism', *Political Studies* 54 (2006) 165-184.

[4] Aristotle, *The Ethics of Aristotle, The Nicomachean Ethics*, Translated by J.A.K. Thomson (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1981) Bk X.

[5] John Stuart Mill, 'Utilitarianism', chap. 3, in: J.S. Mill, *Utilitarianism, On Liberty and Considerations on Representative Government* edited by H.B. Acton (London: Everyman, 1972).

[6] Michael A. E. Dummett, *On Immigration and Refugees* (London: Routledge, 2001).

[7] *On Social Concern* (1987) §38.

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