During his long term as pope, John Paul II contributed much to the development of one core theme in Catholic social teaching—solidarity. The word rarely appears in documents written before 1978 when Karl Wojtyla was elected pontiff. It first gained public attention not within church structures but in the labor organizing effort of a Polish workers’ union. Not surprisingly, Cardinal Wojtyla supported the Polish labor organizers as they drew inspiration from Catholic social teaching on the rights of workers. As pope, John Paul II developed the theme of solidarity far beyond the sphere of labor organizing.

One Human Family

Documents written prior to those of John Paul II laid the foundation for solidarity with their basic teaching on the common good. There is one human family and each member of that family bears a responsibility for the well-being of other members, especially those who are close in terms of family, friends, and geographical area. By the time of the Second Vatican Council it was well established that an individualistic morality does not satisfy one’s obligations of justice and love. Nor is it an adequate response to our call to communion with God. The Council reminded us that

it has pleased God to make men holy and save them not merely as individuals, without any mutual bonds, but by making them into a single people, a people which acknowledges him in truth and serves him in holiness. (The Church in the Modern World, 32)

Universal common good

We satisfy our duties of justice and love in part by reaching out to others and by contributing to the common good—by fostering “those conditions of social life by which individuals, families, and groups can achieve their own fulfillment in a relatively thorough and ready way” (The Church in the Modern World, 74). How we do that and to what extent will vary from one person to another depending upon our circumstances, our resources, and the needs of others. What is clear in Catholic social teaching is that every human being has something to offer to the building up of the human family. The talents that God has placed in each of us for that purpose must be developed and utilized in our work, families, and communities.
war against our neighbors who in spite of seriously wrong actions present to us “the living image of God.”

The U.S. Catholic bishops reflect on additional challenges to living in solidarity with others, especially persons less well off.

Solidarity is action on behalf of the one human family, calling us to help overcome the divisions in our world. Solidarity binds the rich to the poor. It makes the free zealous for the cause of the oppressed. It drives the comfortable and secure to take risks for the victims of tyranny and war. It calls for those who are strong to care for those who are weak and vulnerable across the spectrum of human life. It opens homes and hearts to those in flight from terror and to migrants whose daily toil supports affluent lifestyles. Peacemaking, as Pope John Paul II has told us, is the work of solidarity. (Called to Global Solidarity, 4)

Solidarity, like any virtue, calls for action. It may be a timely act to assist a person in need, active participation in war resistance activities, or an ongoing effort to change our lifestyles so we are capable of responding to others. In any case, to be in solidarity with others is to recognize our shared human dignity, our one human family, and to act accordingly.

Our Brothers’ and Sisters’ Keepers

Catholic social teaching enjoys a strong foundation in the Scriptures and in early Christian writing. There probably is no stronger ethical teaching in these biblical and patristic texts than the call to love our neighbor and to show that love through practical actions. The Letter of James questions how anyone who refuses to help another person in need can possibly have faith. Christian writers of the first few centuries held that to refuse food to a person dying of hunger is to share in the guilt of that person’s death. Solidarity calls us to respond to the needs of others and to do so in concrete, helpful ways.

Linked and limited world

The contemporary emphasis upon solidarity in Catholic social teaching parallels a growing awareness of the interdependencies and limitations in our world. In 1997 the Catholic bishops of the United States commented that globalization in economics, transportation, and communication have
drawn the world together, while at the same time bringing benefits to a few while impoverishing many. “The gulf between rich and poor nations has widened, and the sense of responsibility toward the world’s poor and oppressed has grown weaker. The world watched for too long as thousands died in Bosnia, Rwanda, and Zaire” (Called to Global Solidarity, 2).

Twenty years later that list might include the Sudan and Niger—countries suffering from genocide and famine as the rest of the world fails to respond. These words remind us of the lament of Pope Paul VI forty years ago when he stated that no longer can one be ignorant of the fact that whole continents are ravaged by hunger and condemned to the most depressing living conditions (On the Development of Peoples, 45). Solidarity is in the forefront because we know that millions of people now suffer from unnecessary poverty and oppression. We know the extent of their suffering as well as the circumstances from which it arises. We always have known that Christ’s command to love our neighbor as ourselves means all of our neighbors. Today in a world we know to be so connected and yet so limited, Jesus’ command to love carries particularly strong global implications. This awareness can be both an opportunity and an indictment. It is an opportunity to respond to peoples’ immediate needs and to try to change whatever causes their suffering. Awareness becomes an indictment when, in spite of what we know, we refuse to act. At the start of the twenty-first century the wonders of information technology make us more aware of stressful, painful situations around the globe than at any time in human history. We are our brothers’ and sisters’ keepers and we are called to action on behalf of justice without regard for national boundaries.

Responsible for all

The increasing sense of global connectedness—a dimension of the virtue of solidarity—arises in part from our expanding knowledge of the needs and aspirations of people everywhere. It grows also out of every nation’s recognition that its own hope for a good life is dependent upon people in all parts of the world. Solidarity, then, is not simply a feeling of compassion or pity for persons who are suffering. Nor does it move in only one direction. It is, as Pope John Paul II stated, an enduring commitment to the good of everyone and of every individual person and of every nation because “we are all really responsible for all” (On Social Concern, 38).

Through this virtue of solidarity we are empowered to see all other persons, groups, and nations as our neighbors and helpers. We recognize the one human family that we are, and we celebrate the unique gifts that each person, each culture and each nation brings to this family’s journey to God. As Pope John Paul II stated in his “Message for the World Day of Peace” in 2000, the spirit of solidarity leads us to see the poor “not as a problem, but as people who can become the principle builders of a new and more human future for everyone” (Peace on Earth to Those Whom God Loves, 14). Father Jack challenges his parishioners. In staff meetings and especially in preaching he urges them to understand the causes of their poverty and to recognize their own gifts for confronting and changing some of the factors that contribute to their difficult life.

Those of us in more affluent societies also need to appreciate the wisdom that other nations and cultures bring to the task of building a more humane world. Many of these peoples pursue lifestyles guided by values that inspire caring for neighbors, moderation in consumption, and living in proper relationship with the earth. Solidarity challenges us to live in the awareness of our connectedness to this human family, to respond generously to this family’s needs anywhere, and to receive with humility and gratitude what this family can teach us about being human.

Seeking a Just Social Order

Solidarity leads us to look upon persons and nations as part of one global community sharing the same destiny and benefiting from the blessings and gifts that God has placed in each individual and country. This virtue also directs us to work for changes in the economic, political, and social structures that contribute to the poverty and oppression confronting millions of people around the globe.

Prosperity interdependent

Pope Paul VI reminded us that working for a more just social order contributes to improved living environments and to the complete, integral development of those who are the victims of poverty and injustice. “To wage war on misery and to struggle against injustice is to promote, along with improved conditions, the human and spiritual progress of all men, and therefore the common good of humanity” (On the Development of Peoples, 76). Clearly Paul VI saw such actions as benefiting not only those who suffer but those who work to relieve that suffering and
to challenge whatever causes living conditions that dishonor human dignity. In that sense the spiritual growth of those who are better off is related to the economic improvements of those who are not. The common good of all humanity is enriched by the movement of any people from less to more humane living conditions. Pope John XXIII acknowledged this interdependent progress among nations when he wrote that the prosperity of any one nation is related in a dependent way to the prosperity of all the rest (Peace on Earth, 131). No single nation or block of nations can sustain long term prosperity at the expense or even the neglect of the development needs of other countries.

This interdependence among modern nations creates conditions favorable to the practice of solidarity. It leads to the recognition that the common good of my nation is served by considering the legitimate interests of other peoples and of the entire human family. This is a practical, almost utilitarian form of concern for others, and it may lead to public policies and relationships among nations that benefit everyone. Yet it falls short of the fullness of solidarity. The latter prompts us to consider the needs and interests of others simply because they are persons bearing the same human dignity and rights that we claim for ourselves. Anything we say about our own dignity and destiny, any rights we claim for ourselves in support of a dignified life—all of this we must be willing to grant to any other person in our own country or anywhere in the world. This entails a commitment on our part and a readiness to let go of what we possess.

**Sacrifice**

Pope John Paul II wrote that a way to promote reasonable prosperity and human development among all peoples is to live in a manner that makes resources available to all. “Interdependence must be transformed into solidarity, based on the principle that the goods of creation are meant for all. That which human industry produces through the processing of raw materials, with the contribution of work, must serve equally for the good of all” (On Social Concern, 39).

Any nation blessed with an abundance of natural resources must be willing to share these gifts in a reasonable manner with countries less endowed. Any nation steeped in manufactured material goods also must consider how such abundance might assist those nations unable to produce what is needed for their people. This obligation is grounded in the biblical teaching so clearly articulated by the early Christian writers that all of God’s creation is here to satisfy the needs of everyone. This obligation rests on the practical realization that no nation can prosper indefinitely in a world where other nations suffer from lack of resources. This obligation emerges from the virtue of solidarity—from the habitual practice of recognizing that all of us on earth are children of the one God who calls us to himself and charges us to love one another along the way.

This is no abstraction. It summons us to choices about how we live and what kind of laws and public policies we support. As Pope John Paul II stated, solidarity requires “a concerted worldwide effort to promote development, an effort which also involves sacrificing the positions of income and of power enjoyed by the more developed economies” (On the Hundredth Anniversary, 52). This is the preferential option for the poor applied to the global level. It calls upon all of us to support economic relationships and trade agreements designed especially to help countries with the greatest needs.

**Globalization**

Today we hear much about globalization and its effects, especially economic, upon nations both rich and poor. It bears noting that various aspects of the current globalization process have been in motion for many decades. While difficult to define in a sentence, the practices of transnational corporations in seeking more favorable production conditions around the globe are one example of globalization. Global economic regulatory agencies such as the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and, more recently, the WTO, are also a part of this globalization process. Trade agreements like NAFTA in 1994 and the Central American Free Trade Agreement (CAFTA) in 2005 are but the latest examples of efforts by political and economic decision makers to extend globalization. However defined, its goals are clear: to remove barriers to the trading of commodities (natural and manufactured) as well as enhance the mobility of financial capital and labor across national boundaries. Less clear is how these developments will benefit countries with the greatest needs or even lower income workers in more affluent societies.

The virtue of solidarity in Catholic social teaching provides a perspective for evaluating this worldwide phenomenon, a perspective that draws especially from the church’s teaching on participation as well as the option for the poor and the vulnerable. In his 1998 World Day of Peace message, Pope John Paul II spoke out against the new inequalities that accompany the globalization process.