

opusdei.org

# Solidarity and Subsidiarity

In his 23 September general audience, Pope Francis continued his catechesis on the Church's social teaching, stressing the importance of both solidarity and subsidiarity.

09/23/2020

Dear Brothers and Sisters, it does not seem that the weather is that great, but I wish you a good morning all the same!

To emerge better from a crisis like the current one, which is a health crisis and is, at the same time, a social, political and economic crisis, every one of us is called to assume responsibility for our own part, that is, to share the responsibility. We must respond not only as individual people, but also from the groups to which we belong, out of the roles we have in society, from our principles and, if we are believers, from our faith in God. Often, however, many people cannot participate in the reconstruction of the common good because they are marginalised, they are excluded or ignored; certain social groups do not succeed in making a contribution because they are economically or socially suffocated. In some societies, many people are not free to express their own faith and their own values, their own ideas: if they express them freely, they are put in jail. Elsewhere, especially in the western world,

many people repress their own ethical or religious convictions. This is no way to emerge from the crisis, or at least to emerge from it better. We will emerge from it worse.

So that we might be able to participate in the healing and regeneration of our peoples, it is only right that everyone should have the adequate resources to do so (see *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church* [CSDC], 186). After the great economic depression of 1929, Pope Pius XI explained how important the *principle of subsidiarity* was (see *Encyclical Quadragesimo anno*, 79-80). This principle has a double movement: from top to bottom and from bottom to top. Perhaps we do not understand what this means, but it is a social principle that makes us more united. I will try to explain it.

On the one hand, and above all in moments of change, when single individuals, families, small associations and local communities are not capable of achieving primary objectives, it is then right that the highest levels of society, such as the State, should intervene to provide the necessary resources to progress. For example, because of the coronavirus lockdown, many people, families and economic entities found themselves and still find themselves in serious trouble. Thus, public institutions are trying to help through appropriate interventions, social economic, regarding health...this is their function, what they need to do.

On the other hand, however, society's leaders must respect and promote the intermediate or lower levels. In fact, the contribution of individuals, of families, of associations, of businesses, or every intermediary body, and even of the Church, is

decisive. All of these, with their own cultural, religious, economic resources, or civil participation, revitalize and reinforce society (see CSCD, 185). That is, there is a collaboration from the top and the bottom from the State to the people, and from the bottom to the top, from the institutions of people to the top. And this is exactly how the principle of subsidiarity is exercised.

Everyone needs to have the possibility of assuming their own responsibility in the process of healing the society of which they are a part. When a project is launched that directly or indirectly touches certain social groups, these groups cannot be left out from participating – for example: “What do you do?” “I go to work with the poor.” “Ah, how beautiful. And what do you do?” “I teach the poor, I tell the poor what they need to do.” No, this doesn’t work. The first step is to allow the

poor to tell you how they live, what they need... Let everyone speak! And this is how the principle of subsidiarity works. We cannot leave out the participation of the people; their wisdom; the wisdom of the humbler groups cannot be set aside (see Apostolic Exhortation Querida Amazonia [QA], 32; Encyclical Laudato Si', 63). Unfortunately, this injustice happens often in those places where huge economic and geopolitical interests are concentrated, such as, for example, certain extractive activities in some areas of the planet (see QA, 9.14). The voices of the indigenous peoples, their culture and world visions are not taken into consideration. Today, this lack of respect of the *principle of subsidiarity* has spread like a virus. Let's think of the grand financial assistance measures enacted by States. The largest financial companies are listened to rather than the people or the ones who

really move the economy.

Multinational companies are listened to more than social movements.

Putting it in everyday language, they listen more to the powerful than to the weak and this is not the way, it is not the human way, it is not the way that Jesus taught us, it is not how the principle of subsidiarity is

implemented. Thus, we do not permit people to be “agents in their own redemption”.<sup>[1]</sup> There is this motto in the collective unconscious of some politicians or some social workers: everything for the people, nothing with the people. From top to bottom without listening to the wisdom of the people, without activating the wisdom of the people in resolving problems, in this case to emerge from the crisis. Or let's think about the cure for the virus: the large pharmaceutical companies are listened to more than the healthcare workers employed on the front lines in hospitals or in refugee camps. This

is not a good path. Everyone should be listened to, those who are at the top and those who are at the bottom, everyone.

To emerge better from a crisis, the *principle of subsidiarity* must be enacted, respecting the autonomy and the capacity to take initiative that everyone has, especially the least. All the parts of the body are necessary, as St Paul says, we've heard that those parts that may seem the weakest and least important, in reality are the most necessary (see *1 Cor 12:22*). In light of this image, we can say that the principle of subsidiarity allows everyone to assume his or her own role for the healing and destiny of society. Implementing it, implementing the principle of subsidiarity gives *hope*, gives *hope* in a healthier and more just future; let's construct this future together, aspiring to greater things, broadening our horizons and ideals.



[2] Either we do it together, or it won't work. Or we work together to emerge from the crisis, all levels of society, or we will never emerge from it. It does not work that way. To emerge from the crisis does not mean to varnish over current situations so that they might appear more just. No. To emerge from the crisis means to change, and true change to which every contributes, all the persons that form a people. All the professions, all of them. And everything together, everyone in the community. If everyone is not contributing the result will be negative.

In a previous catechesis we saw how *solidarity* – solidarity now – is the way out of the crisis: it unites us and allows us to find solid proposals for a healthier world. But this path of solidarity needs *subsidiarity*.

Someone might say to me: “But, Father, today you are saying difficult

things!” It’s because of this that I am trying to explain what it means. Solidary, because we are taking the path of subsidiarity. In fact, there is no true solidarity without social participation, without the contribution of intermediary bodies: families, associations, cooperatives, small businesses, and other expressions of society. Everyone needs to contribute, everyone. This type of participation helps to prevent and to correct certain negative aspects of globalization and the actions of States, just as it is happening regarding the healing of people affected by the pandemic. These contributions “from the bottom” should be encouraged. How beautiful it is to see the volunteers during the crisis. The volunteers come from every part of society, volunteers who come from well-off families and those who come from poorer families. But everyone, everyone together to emerge. This is

solidarity and this is the principle of subsidiarity.

During the lockdown, the spontaneous gesture of applauding, applause for doctors and nurses began as a sign of encouragement and hope. Many risked their lives and many gave their lives. Let's extend this applause to every member of the social body, to each and every one, for their precious contribution, no matter how small. "But can that person over there do?" "Listen to that person! Give the person space to work, consult him or her." Let's applaud the "cast-aways", those whom culture defines as those to be "thrown out", this throw-away culture – that is, let's applaud the elderly, children, persons with disability, let's applaud workers, all those who dedicate themselves to service. Everyone collaborating to emerge from the crisis. But let's not stop only at applauding. *Hope* is

audacious, and so, let's encourage ourselves to dream big. Brothers and sisters, let's learn to dream big! Let's not be afraid to dream big, seeking the ideals of justice and social love that are born of hope. Let's not try to reconstruct the past, the past is the past, let's look forward to new things. The Lord's promise is: "I will make all things news". Let's encourage ourselves to dream big, seeking those ideals, not trying to reconstruct the past, above all the past that was unjust and already ill.... Let's construct a future where the local and global dimensions mutually enrich each other – everyone can contribute, everyone must contribute their share, from their culture, from their philosophy, from their way of thinking – where the beauty and the wealth of smaller groups, even the groups that are cast aside, might flourish –because beauty is there too – and where those who have more dedicate themselves to service and

give more to those who have less.  
Thank you.

---

[1] Message for the 106th World Day of Migrants and Refugees 2020 (13 May 2020).

[2] See Discourse to students at the Fr. Félix Varela Cultural Center, Havana – Cuba, 20 September 2015.

---

pdf | document generated  
automatically from <https://opusdei.org/en-in/article/solidarity-and-subsidiarity/>  
(07/18/2025)