Fostering a Culture of Peace:
Embracing the “Us”

By Meghan J. Clark, Ph.D.

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Education for Justice, a project of Center of Concern
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Active in public theology, she is a columnist for US Catholic magazine and blogs at Millennial Journal. Dr. Clark received her Bachelor of Arts degree summa cum laude from Fordham University in 1999 with a double major in philosophy and theology. She received a Doctor of Philosophy (2009) in Theological Ethics from Boston College under the supervision of Fr. David Hollenbach, S.J.

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# Works by Meghan J. Clark, Ph.D.

## Books

## America Magazine: The Jesuit Review

## U.S. Catholic: Faith in Real Life

## Health Progress: Journal of the Catholic Health Association

## Videos
While writing this reflection, angry white supremacists carrying torches marched on a church at the University of Virginia. The next morning they were joined by heavily armed white supremacists for a rally with chants inspired by the Nazis, as well as, “you will not replace us” or “black lives do not matter.”

In January, I participated in a very different type of protest. In the wake of President Trump’s executive order banning all refugees and immigrants from seven countries, hundreds of protestors gathered outside terminal four at JFK airport. Inside teams of lawyers set up to provide legal advice for those being detained, outside in the parking lot we chanted, “Refugees are Welcome Here.”

Ultimately, these two rallies are diametrically opposed and it is a matter of whether or not one embraces an inclusive us. Fostering a culture of peace necessarily begins with embracing the one human family, embracing the us.

On one of his first visits to the Jesuit Refugee Center, Pope Francis challenged everyone stating, “Solidarity is a word that scares the developed world. People try not to use it. It’s as if it were a swear word to them. But it is our Word!”

The Pope packed a great deal into these short sentences. Why does solidarity scare us? Why do we seem to run from it? The events in Charlottesville are a physical manifestation of running from solidarity, of treating it like a dirty word. At JFK, we tried to make visible another way, one that welcomes. As Christians, even more is at stake than rallies or approaches to immigration. Solidarity is, as Pope Francis notes, a word that connects us to Jesus and the incarnation. Jesus is the Word of God, the Word made flesh. If we run from the very word solidarity, we are in fact running from Jesus Christ. It is this deep theology of solidarity and its importance for fostering a culture of peace that I want to unpack in this reflection.
1) Starting with the Challenge of Human Vulnerability

Embracing the one human family requires seeing the other as another you, as having equal human dignity. An extreme example of refusing to do so is Lord Voldemort, the epic villain from J.K. Rowling’s *Harry Potter* series. Seeking power, invincibility and to separate himself from the other, Voldemort will stop at nothing to remove all vulnerability. In doing so, he must eliminate all human connections and as a result, he is incapable of any truly human relationships. To love is to accept vulnerability. One cannot love without being affected by the joys and sorrows of another. Singer Sara Groves beautifully expresses this in her song *I saw what I saw*. Reflecting on her trip to post-genocide Rwanda, she sings, “Your pain has changed me.” According to Voldemort, these bonds of love and friendship make hero Harry Potter weak; and yet, Harry’s strength lies in precisely these vulnerabilities.

Vulnerability is an unavoidable part of human existence. It represents our deep interconnection and the fact that others and the world around us impact us. On its own, vulnerability can be positive or negative. It can be a source of strength or the result of injustice. It also is often an existential source of anxiety. As human beings, we are comfortable with freedom and control and similarly uncomfortable with being reminded of our physical and emotional vulnerability and limits. American theologian Reinhold Niebuhr identified the struggle between freedom and finitude as the fundamental anxiety of the human condition. Pride, he argued, stems from over emphasizing our freedom in the face of our limits. This anxiety, in my opinion, is part of why people run from the very word solidarity.

Human vulnerability comes in many forms and is quite complex. In this reflection, I wish only to look at vulnerability as it pertains to thinking about being part of the one human family and solidarity. Seeing the connections between our own contingent reality and that of others often helps us remove barriers to see the other as like us. Compassion is our ability to suffer with another, to enter into their reality and make their struggles our own.

However, being confronted with this kind of vulnerability can also lead people to retreat from community. This is evidenced in most of Voldemort’s followers—those who simply want security and status. Those who have experienced the freedoms of privilege and so will even
use violence to defend their claim to be better than and less vulnerable than others. The price for their privilege and security is increased unjust vulnerability for others. Both the Malfoys and the white nationalist young men carrying torches are examples of this response to an ever-changing and more inclusive world.

Racism, sexism, poverty, and war are all examples of unjust vulnerability in which some people are exposed to heightened risk while others protected because of gender, race, wealth or nationality. These unjust and persistent physical and emotional vulnerabilities are the result of social sin or structural violence. Human rights advocate Dr. Paul Farmer defines structural violence as “as a broad rubric that includes a host of offensives against human dignity: extreme and relative poverty, social inequalities ranging from racism to gender inequality, and the more spectacular forms of violence that are uncontestably human rights abuses.” Here, vulnerability often means death.

In the abstract, unjust vulnerability is the easiest for us to “take a stance against,” but hardest to move into action. The outcry in response to Charlottesville has been immense, but will this morph into action? We have witnessed both a resounding outcry and inability to respond with respect to Aleppo and Syria. When faced with images of children after a bombing attack in Syria, people respond to perceived vulnerability in at least two ways. For some, they will see their own children or their friends and family in the faces of the victims. Moved with compassion, they seek to welcome the other. Unfortunately, others will see the vulnerability of those children and retreat. Instead of welcome, they will seek to separate and insulate themselves even more. Even worse, the reactionary desire to protect oneself can lead to increasing unjust vulnerabilities of others.

When faced with the suffering of refugees, Pope Francis said he often asks himself, why not me? In recognizing the equal human dignity of each refugee, Francis faces the contingency of human life. In the face of equal human dignity, white nationalism resists needing to assert dominance or power over others. These two divergent responses to human suffering are implied by the two rallies above.
2) Who is my neighbor? Reconsidering the Parable of the Good Samaritan

It is a story everyone knows. We know it so well that often we tune out while listening and fall back on memory. In 2017, the Parable of the Good Samaritan is often reduced to a nice story about caring for those less fortunate. But Jesus did not tell heart-warming stories; his parables always have a kick. The parable forces us to rethink who counts as us.

In Luke’s narrative, three members of the religious elite appear: a priest, a Levite, and, in Jesus’ interlocutor, a scholar of the (religious) law. All three presumed to know and understand what the Lord wants of us. Yet all three fail. The scholar of the law is looking for justification and a guarantee. The priest and the Levite both fail to show mercy to the wounded man on the side of the road. In the fundamental twist of the story, a Samaritan moved with compassion stops and cares for the man. Examining the parable in context, the radical bite of the parable becomes clear—Samaritans were outcasts. Who is neighbor? Who shows mercy? The one the audience did not want to admit as a member of the community. The Samaritan is rejected as other, yet he embraces us anyway.

The Samaritan demonstrates a radical unsselfishness, seeing the dignity of the wounded man. Speaking to sanitation workers the night before he died, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr highlighted the parable of the Good Samaritan. Where the priest and the Levite were preoccupied with their own safety, the Samaritan instead asked “what will happen to this man if I do not stop?” The parable breaks down assumptions about who counts as one’s neighbor both in the person of the Samaritan and in the wounded man.

Again, the fundamental question: who is my neighbor? Culturally, we use the term neighbor quite loosely referring to those who happen to live next door. Yet, according to Fr. Gustavo Gutierrez, the Christian understanding of neighbor is different, quite different. He explains,
“Our neighbor is a person who is not close to us. It is not the person next to us. The neighbor is not the person that we find on our way, but that person that we approach to the extent we leave our own way, our own path, managing to approach others. If we leave our path at the moment, then we go towards a person. And the Good Samaritan leaves his own path in order to help the wounded person.” Embracing one’s neighbor requires going out of oneself, leaving one’s path, and entering the path of another. Embracing the us is not a default setting—it is an active, chosen response to our common humanity.

3) Solidarity: We image God in the World

Human dignity is the first principle of Catholic social teaching. The firm belief that every person is equally created in the image and likeness of God is the foundation. But, what does it mean to be created imago dei? Christians are perpetually called to reflect upon this question. Historically, theologians throughout the Christian tradition identified human rationality and relationality as two ways in which we are in the image of God.

Solidarity is rooted in the universality of the imago dei and the belief that we are one human family. Exploring the social nature of the person is crucial to understanding human dignity. Not only did God create all of us in God’s own image, God entered into relationship with us. Vatican II explains “God did not create the person for life in isolation but for the formation of social unity...So from the beginning of salvation history, he has chosen people not just as individuals but as members of a certain community.” Throughout the Biblical narratives, God enters into covenants with peoples, including succeeding generations of peoples reaching across our traditional understandings of past, present, and future. The human community is intergenerational, ever expanding and all-inclusive.8

We are one human family. This is a reality that places a claim upon us. St. John Paul II defined solidarity as “it is a firm and persevering determination to commit oneself to the common good; that is to say to the good of all and of each individual, because we are all

“I can never be what I ought to be until you are what you ought to be. This is the way our world is made. No individual or nation can stand out boasting of being independent, we are interdependent.”

– Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.
really responsible for all.”

Solidarity is the virtue by which we embrace the one human family, recognize and become neighbor to others. It is the recognition that our humanity, as in the image of God, involves a responsibility to live a certain way.

Catholic social teaching’s principle of integral human development recognizes that our world and our lives can be rendered more or less fully human. A new question emerges: how do we more fully image God in the world? A good starting place is to “imagine a circle of compassion and then imagine no one standing outside of it,” to quote Fr. Greg Boyle, S.J., or Homeboy Industries. In response, we are charged with going out to the margins and pushing that circle of compassion even wider until no one is excluded.

Theologically, imago dei must also be understood as imago trinitatis. Solidarity reminds us that my humanity is bound up in yours. We are human together and my dignity is violated when yours is violated. The equality, mutuality, and reciprocity of the Trinity then becomes a powerful ethical challenge for human relationship. In this way, following the example of the Samaritan is not weakness but fortitude for, as Pope Francis urges, “the future is, most of all, in the hands of those people who recognize the other as a ‘you’ and themselves as part of an us.”

4) Amani: Embracing Children on the Margins and Becoming One Community

Tucked away in the Riruta section of Nairobi is a remarkable place—the Amani Primary school. Amani is a living example of embracing the us. A primary school run by the Missionary Sisters of the Precious Blood, it provides rehabilitation and primary education for street children from the nearby Kawangare slum. In 2015, I had the privilege of spending time with the sisters and school for a number of their school assemblies and celebrations.
In the late 1980s, hungry children were spontaneously arriving in their courtyard. Responding to the direct need, they built a small structure with a kitchen and began serving soup. As they listened and ministered to these children. Street children are often either invisible or viewed as a nuisance to those who do “notice them.” Like the Samaritan, the Sisters asked themselves what would happen to these children if we do not respond?

Bit by bit, they moved from instruction in English, Swahili, and Math to establishing a fully functioning primary school that in 2007 graduated its first class from Grade 8 taking the national exam. Students are placed by ability and every effort is taken to allow them to complete primary school, take the national exam and move onto secondary school. This is sometimes a great challenge as students may have been “out of school” for many years when they come to Amani. At one school celebration, I met one of those very first graduates who went on to secondary school then university. Inspired by Amani, he pursued a degree in education and was waiting his first job placement. The deep bond between Amani and its young people persists as many graduates come back to help out.

By embracing the us, Amani creates a community of solidarity. Students seek out and participate in their own fundraisers—winning one competition where they won themselves enough to purchase new shoes for all of the students. In recent years, Amani has developed beyond the school to include a series of outreach programs to engage the parents—workshops and meetings. It is a beautiful example of “there is no them, only us.”

“Understanding attracts peace; it brings near that which is far.”
– Swahili Proverb
Building a community of solidarity requires that we are all fully human in the encounter. It requires the recognition that we are human together, that my humanity is bound up in yours. This is the model I witnessed at Amani. The Precious Blood sisters did not simply feed hungry children, staying separate and protected. They entered into the children’s reality—listening, questioning, and out of this reflection—a school was born. But, they never stopped listening and “reading the signs of the times.” For me, the Amani community is a beautiful and concrete example of embracing the us and it is fitting that Amani is the ki-Swahili word for peace.

**PRAYER**

**Leader:** God is Good

**Refrain:** All the Time

**Leader:** May we foster inclusive communities of peace and inclusion, inspired by the example of Amani.

**Refrain:** Lord, Graciously Hear Us.

**Leader:** May we follow Jesus and bring a message of unconditional love into the fragility and brokenness of our world.

**Refrain:** Lord, Graciously Hear Us.

**Leader:** May we reject the politics of fear and all forms of racism, sexism, and xenophobia.

**Refrain:** Lord, Graciously Hear Us.

**Leader:** May we stand up to injustice and actively work for peace and justice in our families, our communities, our country, and our world.

**Refrain:** Lord, Graciously Hear Us.

**Leader:** May we follow the examples of Oscar Romero and Martin Luther King, Jr, living as witnesses to justice and righteousness standing with those who are excluded, beaten, and unjustly killed.

**Refrain:** Lord, Graciously Hear Us.

**Leader:** May we be inspired by the witness of St. Francis of Assisi, fostering an inclusive culture of peace.

**Refrain:** Lord, Graciously Hear Us. Amen.
**DISCUSSION QUESTIONS**

1. When you hear the word solidarity, what emotions do you feel? Does it attract or scare you? Why or why not?

2. What are examples of human vulnerability? What is an example of vulnerability that connects people? What are examples of unjust vulnerability? How do you analyze and respond to unjust vulnerabilities in your life or others in your communities?

3. Who are today’s Samaritans? Who are the members of our community that we do not recognize as being part of “us”? What are instances where we seek to justify ourselves as doing enough? How can we more faithfully practice radical unselfishness?

4. What does it mean to be one human family? How are we living as the image and likeness of God? What barriers do you see to being in solidarity with people around the world?

**FAITH IN ACTION**

1. Keep informed on situations of injustice, marginalization, and conflict both in your local community and more globally. Read and listen to a wide range of news and documentary sources guided by the question: who and what am I not seeing?

2. Learn and participate in religious advocacy efforts such as those fostered by Caritas Internationalis, Catholic Relief Services, and Jesuit Refugee Services.

3. Take action personally and politically to accompany vulnerable peoples through prayer, service and action. For example: praying for the homeless, service within the local community, and advocacy for just housing policies.

4. Listen to and learn from local community organizing for justice, especially faith based organizing (such as Catholic Campaign for Human Development groups) so as to more faithfully accompany and advocate with those on the margins.
RECOMMENDED VIDEOS FOR REFLECTION AND DISCUSSION


2. One Love (Bob Marley), [http://bit.ly/1BSQ1xT](http://bit.ly/1BSQ1xT)
9. Immigrants, we get the job done (Hamilton Mixtape), [http://bit.ly/2si41a3](http://bit.ly/2si41a3)
15. We are the World 25th Anniversary, [http://bit.ly/1AEcn1O](http://bit.ly/1AEcn1O)


