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## Toward a Spirituality of Accompaniment in Solidarity Partnerships

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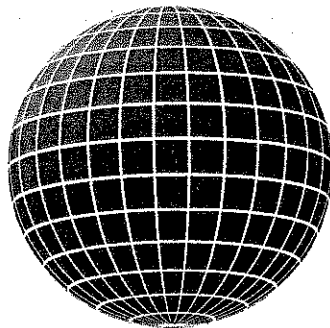
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*This article will examine the widespread and growing movement of solidarity partnerships as a primary way in which ordinary churchgoers practice global mission in today's church. It will describe the movement and attempt to view it from the eyes of the resource-poor partners in the developing world. It will look at the strengths, challenges, and failures of solidarity partnerships, and illustrate some of the best practices. It suggests that solidarity partnerships have enormous potential to contribute to "overcoming the divisions in our world" but all too frequently have amplified them. The article concludes with recommendations for a changed approach.<sup>1</sup>*

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"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 calls those who are strong to care for those who are weak and vulnerable across the spectrum of human life." (United States Conference of Catholic Bishops [USCCB], 1997)

### Introduction

**S**olidarity partnerships, also frequently called "sister" or "twinning" relationships, are mission relationships between a parish or church community, diocese, national church body, religious order, school, college, university, or faith-based organization in the developed world—usually the United States, Canada, or Europe—and a similar church body or organization in the developing world or in a poverty-stricken area of a developed country. At its best, this boundary-crossing mission work can be transformational for all parties in tangible and intangible ways. It can provide material assistance to communities in desperate need and raise awareness about the causes of their misery. It can reduce national, cultural, or economic divisions and

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promote a deepening awareness of our shared identity as children of the One Creator. In short, it can be a witness to the Reign of God breaking through in our time.

The partnering phenomenon is widespread and is practiced among most Christian denominations. Because my own experience has involved partnership work primarily in a US Catholic context, mostly but not exclusively between the US and Haiti, this article will focus on solidarity partnerships between Catholic Church bodies in the United States and those in developing countries.

In a 2003 survey conducted by the US Catholic Mission Association [USCMA], 11 US dioceses reported that between 3 percent and 15 percent of their parishes were involved in some type of global twinning or partnering relationship (Bernhardt-Hsu 2003: 3–4). In 2005, there were 18,891 total Catholic parishes in the United States (Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate [CARA] 2011). If the statistics were similar for all dioceses, then in 2005 there would have been between 567 and 2,834 parishes in the United States involved in some type of partnership relationship.<sup>2</sup> The Catholic Relief Services Haiti Partnership Unit, where I work as senior advisor, estimates that there are more than 500 Catholic parishes in the United States partnering with Haiti alone, and this number continues to grow in the aftermath of the January 2010 earthquake that devastated Haiti. Thus, a conclusion that up to 15 percent of US parishes are involved in a solidarity partnership does not seem too far fetched, and these figures do not take into account diocese-to-diocese relationships, partnerships between and among Catholic religious orders, schools, or universities, and Catholic non-profit organizations partnering with a Catholic church or other group.

The partnering movement is a vital part of the global mission work of the US Catholic Church today. Furthermore, because there are so many partnered parishes and educational institutions, this is truly a grass-roots phenomenon that potentially involves lay Catholics from all walks of life. As such, it warrants taking a closer look, to examine the motivation behind the movement, its successes, challenges, and best practices, and in light of all that, to offer suggestions for an approach that honors the dignity of both partners. I offer this reflection as part of that conversation.

### Background and Motivation

Understanding the motivation behind solidarity partnerships will contribute to developing a means to evaluate the success or failure of partnerships, because we can then ask ourselves if we have accomplished what we hoped to accomplish. The USCMA study noted that all 11 of the dioceses that responded to their survey cited a theological or doctrinal motivation for their solidarity partnership ministries. In other words, diocesan offices were motivated by recent publications in Catholic Social Teaching and Catholic mission theology to develop programs in line with these theologies. In particular, all respondents referred to the USCCB document, “Called to Global Solidarity (1997),” as a primary motivator (Bernhardt-Hsu 2003:5). It is interesting to note that the partnerships in their 2003 survey were on average between three and four years old (page 6), and so it seems possible that at a diocesan level the groundbreaking USCCB document on solidarity really did help to start a movement, which was the reason for its publication in the first place.

“Called to Global Solidarity” is a Catholic Social Teaching document that affirms that global mission is not just the work of a few international missionaries but the call of all Catholics. Catholics have a responsibility to address global poverty through the work of solidarity. In particular, individual Catholics have a responsibility to incorporate solidarity into the ways they practice their faith. Also, the parish is the place for common action “in pursuit of global solidarity” (USCCB 1997).<sup>3</sup> Although Catholic doctrine may not always seem to be an effective motivator, in this case, in my experience, the message resonates with the average person in the pew. As noted earlier, I spent nearly eight years directing the justice, peace, and community service ministries of a large Catholic parish in the Archdiocese of Washington, and part of that portfolio was managing and developing the parish partnership with Haiti. Subsequent work has led me to partnership ministries around the globe and has given me the opportunity to observe why people of faith get involved.

The main reason that Catholics enter into solidarity partnerships is poverty statistics and accompanying images of poverty, and this also explains why so many of the partnerships take place in Haiti. People see television images of remote villages suffering from malnutrition, violence, natural disasters, disease, or illiteracy, and seeing the suffering of an impoverished mass of people moves us into mission work. I find that people appreciate it when their church community provides an opportunity for them to get involved, and they are especially motivated to support projects when they feel the kind of personal connection that twinning allows. Furthermore, committed Christians care about our relationship with God, we believe that relationship is fostered through following in the footsteps of Jesus, and we understand that Jesus responded to the needy and marginalized of his day. In short, we get involved in mission work because we are trying to help, and we believe that we are closer to God in doing so.

“Called to Global Solidarity” asks US Catholics to make action for global solidarity integral to parish life, and the document highlights parish solidarity partnerships as one means to accomplish this (USCCB 1997). However, the partnership is not the reason for its own existence. The point of the partnership is to provide a mechanism for US Catholics, through relationships with impoverished or suffering communities, to work to alleviate global poverty and suffering, and in so doing, to bring our world closer to the vision God has for us, as expressed through the life and ministry of Jesus. In evaluating solidarity partnerships, we must ask if they accomplish these goals.

Neither the USCMA study nor the document, “Called to Global Solidarity,” address the motivation of parishes and church bodies in the developing world, but any healthy partnership must reflect the desires and motivations of both partners. In a short piece about the partnership relationship between the Catholic Church of Peru and the German Diocese of Freiburg, Peruvian theologian Gustavo Gutiérrez suggests that in a healthy solidarity partnership everyone gives and everyone receives; In this way, partnership is a process of mutual recognition of the dignity of the other—and as such is more than just a mechanism for wealthier Catholics to give something. Gutiérrez affirms the desire for material support on the part of the less fortunate partner but only in a context of mutuality and equality (Gutiérrez 1996:53–56). Furthermore, Gutiérrez has this to say about mutuality:

To recognize the dignity of every human being, to value them as the center of their own decision-making and as the agent of their own destiny, implies an understanding that eliminating unjust structures is not enough. It is necessary at the same time to esteem and to transform the person from the inside (1996:54).

In short, Gutiérrez suggests that the partner with fewer material resources wants to be seen by the other in their full dignity as children of God, and thus recognized as an equal partner in the relationship. This desire for recognition seems to be a motivating factor for getting involved in a partnership, but requires a process of transformation within both partners.

The Haitian Conference of Catholic Bishops released a statement not long after the devastation of the 2010 earthquake that affirms many of Gutiérrez's observations. After thanking the world for the tremendous outpouring of material support, they go on to say:

The Church itself embodies God's love and fulfills her mission by promoting the fullness of the human person, who stands at the center of a new Haiti. More than food and shelter; chapels and schools; clinics and convents, we aim to build up every Haitian man and woman in his or her totality: physically, intellectually, emotionally and spiritually. If our work does not involve the whole person and every person, it is not true development. This then is our goal: integral human development (Conference Episcopale d'Haiti [CEH] 2010: 3).<sup>4</sup>

The bishops recognize that solutions for Haiti will only take place through collaboration with global Catholic Church partners, but affirm that Haitians must be the "protagonists in their own development" (CEH 2010:2).

For Haitians, and for Latin America in general, poverty has meant more than just a lack of material wealth or resources. Poverty has been physical, but also mental and cultural, and it is only through cultural, spiritual, and intellectual development that the poor will truly be able to move beyond poverty. Essential to this development of the whole person is the poor taking responsibility and becoming the leaders in their own development. The recognition that materially poor countries must design their own futures, reflected in the Haitian bishops' document, Gutiérrez calls an "exceptional time in the history of Latin America and the life of the church" (2003:20).

What is new is not wretchedness and repression and premature death, for these, unfortunately, are ancient realities in these countries. What is new is that the people are beginning to grasp the causes of their situation of injustice and are seeking to release themselves from it (2003:20).

From the perspective of the partner in a developing country, solidarity means support for the actions of the poor to release themselves from the death of poverty in all its dimensions.

In summary, we can say that in a solidarity partnership the wealthy partner wants to provide material resources and the poor partner wants to receive them. Furthermore both partners see this as an action that embodies God's love for humanity. However the partner from the developing country seems to be seeking something more than just material aid. The partner from the developing country is seeking recognition of his or her dignity. Unfortunately, as we shall see, this has frequently not been considered o-

understood in the ways that solidarity partnerships are implemented. In addition, partnerships have frequently failed to alleviate or diminish even material poverty.

### Challenges

The USCMA study notes that establishing partnerships that are mutual and not paternalistic was expressed as a key concern of the dioceses who responded to their survey.

One of the responses aptly describes that they are concerned "that [the relationships] may not be mutual, but are too 'one-way' with some archdiocesan parishes assuming an air of superiority—we have the goods, 'we have the answers' mentality—that only enhances the feeling of inferiority among the peoples of the twinning parish. [Also, another concern is] that it becomes a way for the people to just 'feel good about themselves for contributing' without allowing the experience to be a source of conversion or transformation" (2003: 9).

This is consistent with my own experience working with solidarity partnerships. People in the United States generally want to send money to pay for a specific program or building project, or they want to send food or other goods, or they want to send a work group. Often we lead the program ourselves, with limited input from the receiving community. Rarely do we consider the long-term financial sustainability of the projects we start, nor do we prepare the receiving community to take responsibility for it after we are gone.

In Haiti, this has led to a multitude of failed projects and very little progress in combating material poverty.<sup>5</sup> My own story is typical. Starting in late 1996 I accepted the position that involved managing a sister parish in Haiti. The project had been launched about a year prior, and the parish in Maryland where I worked had begun by paying the salaries of all the teachers in the local Catholic primary schools. This was and is typical, because the parents do not have the money to pay the fees. Paying the teacher salaries enables their children to attend school. We also sent medical missions, started a school nutrition program, and sent goods, especially school supplies and medications. A few years into the project we began the work of raising money to build a secondary school, something the community really wanted.

In 2004, as I was preparing to leave the parish position, I asked myself what we had accomplished. It was true that many, many more children received an education, and the secondary school was highly successful. It is important to not discount the importance of education in a country that boasts an adult illiteracy rate of 47 percent (Central Intelligence Agency [CIA] 2011). The problem was that the community had no capacity to sustain the projects without outside help. We had done little to develop local capacity to take financial responsibility for the schools, which would have required working with the community to develop their potential to earn money. I had discovered that in the United States it is easy to get people to give money for education and building projects, or for direct material aid, but extremely difficult to get people to contribute toward projects that generate income and livelihoods, and that in turn end or reduce dependency on charitable aid. And as long as communities are dependent upon outside aid for survival, we are not reducing poverty as they define it

themselves, because we are not working with them to develop their capacity to take care of themselves.

In a recent speech before the Baltimore Council on Foreign Affairs, Ken Hackett, President and CEO of Catholic Relief Services, sums up the dynamic:

Over the last three decades when faced with problems in Haiti, our solution has too often been to do it, fix it, and run it. There are thousands of fragmented, individual initiatives and hundreds of humanitarian groups, religious organizations, individual parishes, and even individuals, active in Haiti. And the earthquake brought even more in. Such fragmentation of effort has led to an improvement in the lives of many individuals, but it has also promoted a mentality among Haitians of passivity, a reliance on foreign solutions and resources . . . it has undermined the responsibility of the Haitian nation as a whole - both its government and its other civil institutions. That's what has to change if the path ahead to prosperity is to change (2011).

In fixing, building, and running it ourselves, we deny our partner in the developing world the opportunity to take responsibility for his or her own destiny. We deny them the very thing they have asked us for: to respect their dignity enough to step aside and allow them to become the *protagonists in their own development*.

### Toward a Spirituality of Accompaniment

One solution is to initiate training programs that instruct people on best practices in solidarity partnerships. The USCMA study makes a number of very good suggestions on best practices (2003: 12–18),<sup>6</sup> and Catholic Relief Services [CRS] also has a training manual and holds workshops that I help to facilitate (CRS 2011). In addition, it would be important for seminary courses on mission to recognize that solidarity partnership has become a significant way that global mission is practiced today. In my doctoral-level coursework on global mission, neither the professors nor the course materials ever even mentioned solidarity partnerships as a way to practice mission. We were still focused on an older paradigm of doing mission: training priests, religious sisters, and lay people to work as missionaries in a developing country for a period of months or years. However, in addition to training missionaries, seminaries also train future leaders in US-based church ministries, including global solidarity ministries. Seminary programs that prepare future ministers to shape and lead global solidarity partnerships could make a vital contribution to improving the way partnership is practiced.

I suggest coursework that expands the notion of mission to include solidarity partnerships and includes the best practices in partnerships as part of the study of the best practices in mission. Seminaries could also offer a one-credit course that examines local solidarity partnerships in light of contemporary mission theology and the best practices. This would enable future ministers to take a more in-depth look at solidarity partnerships and prepare them to lead the ministry responsibly in the future.

However, in my view, fundamentally what lies beneath the way we in the US implement solidarity is not a failure to recognize the best practices. In our failure to recognize the human dignity of the other, we are also failing to recognize our own dignity. Is it really true that the best we can offer of ourselves is money? It seems to me that this is how we have been presenting ourselves, and so, in turn, this is how we

are received. I have felt enormously frustrated in my global mission work because not infrequently people in the communities where I have worked start asking for money almost immediately. I want to be more than a money tree. This dynamic violates the dignity of all of us: the poor have become objects of our charity and we have become objects from which to seek funding. I believe that this is what Gustavo Gutiérrez is getting at (above) when he suggests that partnership is a process of mutual recognition of dignity of the other. If we start out with nothing but giving and receiving money and/or things, we have undermined that process from the beginning.

I am proposing that this is a spiritual problem and requires a spiritual solution, and that the practice of solidarity must be guided by a spirituality of *accompaniment*.

At a recent planning session of an association of coffee growers I work with in Haiti, one of the growers stood up and asked me, “Will you continue to accompany us?” In part he meant to find out whether I would continue working with them to develop the market for their coffee. But I think that he really wanted to make sure that I was going to continue to stand with them, and that I would not abandon them as they moved forward in developing their project. He wanted to know that they were not alone.

A few years ago I conducted a series of interviews in rural Colombia, to find out from subsistence farmers and miners living in a zone of conflict why they sought outside “accompaniment” and what accompaniment meant to them. Accompaniment in their context was what they called the presence of outsiders who are connected to a larger network of support, usually from the US, Canada, or Europe, whether ongoing or occasional. Without exception, every person I interviewed stated that the most important aspect of outside accompaniment is that the communities feel that they are not alone. This feeling of being accompanied gives people the confidence that their project for survival, whatever it is, is a valid one, and that their way of life is worth preserving. In short, it affirms the dignity of the community, and this gives them the confidence to initiate and take the leadership in local economic development projects (Lamberty 2010: 51–52).

Solidarity in the midst of suffering is what reveals to us the ultimate powerlessness of suffering: our common life, manifested in our relationships of solidarity, overcomes all attempts to destroy that life. Suffering shared is suffering already in retreat (Goizueta 1995: 183).

Solidarity based in accompaniment is presence, grounded in relationship, manifested by walking with communities and individuals who are suffering. Eleanor Doidge calls it “mission in the heart of God” (Doidge: 162). To really understand the meaning of a spirituality of accompaniment, we first have to attempt to see the world through God’s eyes. A reflection on the nature of God and the nature of humanity begins with a reflection on the first chapter of Genesis. God creates every human person in the image and likeness of God. Each of us holds equal value in the eyes of God. For this reason, all poverty, oppression, and suffering must be a scandal to God. Seeing this, and recognizing the inherent dignity of each human person as created in God’s image, those of us from wealthier contexts have no choice but to act on behalf of those who suffer. We honor God by seeking to end the suffering of God’s children.

But how to respond? The answer lies in how God responds to suffering. God does not solve all our problems for us. God does not make our suffering disappear. God does walk with us, in constant presence and relationship, giving us the courage to continue and to construct a new future. God accompanies us, and in turn we accompany each other. Accompaniment in a mission context is to be present in relationship with those who suffer. The love that we experience in our relationships gives us power and courage, and sometimes that is all that is needed. *Suffering shared is suffering already in retreat.* In a personal interview, Colombian Jesuit Francisco DeRoux stated it this way:

What accompaniment does is simply contribute to creating the space, to creating the conditions, so that God manifests, through the Spirit, in some men and women who are suppressed and living under difficult restrictions. A good accompanier contributes to lifting the restrictions so that this manifestation of God can be seen (Lamberty 2010: 55).

Through these relationships we learn to see each other in the fullness of our humanity. We are no longer objects.

A number of years ago I was injured while doing mission work. I am unsure how they found out about it, but I learned that the community in Haiti I have been accompanying for many years had begun to pray for my recovery at Mass every day. When they learned I was injured, they began to accompany me through prayer. This illustrates probably the most important point about a spirituality of accompaniment: in a healthy relationship all are accompaniers and all are accompanied. It is the human condition to give and to receive. Accompaniment based in presence and relationship is equal and mutual and life giving for everyone involved.

A spirituality of accompaniment is also made visible in Jesus' resurrection. Even in death Jesus does not abandon his community. In the resurrection story told in John 21, Jesus appears to the disciples by the shore of the Sea of Tiberias. Jesus shows them where to cast their nets to catch a huge load of fish, and then they came ashore. Jesus was waiting there with a fire, and taking some of the fish, Jesus cooked breakfast. Not only is he still present—he cooks them breakfast! Through this act, Jesus makes manifest the very nature of God.

This communion ritual is a symbol of the communion that all of humanity shares. For Catholics, we celebrate the fact that God is with us each time we receive Eucharist. The way we experience God with us is the same way we are asked to remain present to each other.

A spirituality of accompaniment begins with recognition of the dignity of the self as well as the other as created in God's image. It is expressed in presence, relationship, community, and service. Accompaniment can also be expressed in a gift of material resources to assist a suffering community in rebuilding its future. Jesus illustrates in John 21 that the most suitable kind of material gift would be one that aids the community in providing for itself, such as showing it where or how to fish. Jesus did not get up and fish for them. In Colombia, this was described as "economic solidarity," where a community with resources assists in the long-term income-generation projects developed by the materially poor community (Lamberty 2010: 66). This kind of gift

respects the independence of the receiver and understands the receiver as ultimately being in charge of his or her own destiny.

Our best practices in mission begin with and flow out of this spirituality of accompaniment. These will include the following:

#### *Learning the Language, Culture and Traditions of the Other Partner*

Real relationship is possible only when the partners can communicate, and when each understands the context of the other. In the Peru-Freiburg partnership discussed earlier, the Germans were learning Spanish and the Peruvians were learning German. In my experience, even rudimentary attempts to communicate in the language of the other go a long way toward building trust in the relationship, because if I am learning your language, I am committed to you. We also need to understand the cultural norms and traditions of the other, so that we are able to understand the meanings the lie behind our words.

#### *Praying for and with Each Other*

Prayer not only binds us to God; it also binds us to each other. When we pray for another, we cement our relationship. When we pray together, we express our communion.

#### *Regular and Reciprocal Visits That Focus on Building Relationships*

I have organized and led multiple short-term visits to Haiti, and I find that most people in the US want to *do* something. We want to teach something, to build something, to treat someone's illness. Our focus is on doing rather than being together, and usually the agenda is so packed we have little time to rest. My greatest memories from short-term trips to Haiti involve sitting on a porch with our Haitian hosts drinking Prestige beer, laughing and getting to know one another. A trip I will never forget is one where we spent an afternoon teaching each other songs from our respective cultures. These experiences build relationship and trust and are the foundation for any future ministries conducted in partnership. If possible, the trips should be reciprocal, so that partners from the developing country can also come to know the wider community in the US.

#### *Mutual and Joint Decision Making That Respects the Leadership and Community Processes of Both Partners*

In a true partnership, each acknowledges the value of the other. Acknowledging the valued role and gifts of the other is the starting point for creating a structure and joint decision-making process that includes both partners. The Catholic Relief Services *Parish Partnership Manual* suggests the following:

To ensure mutuality and joint decision-making, it is helpful to establish a representative body in each parish who can interact with each other as equals to set priorities, create plans, mobilize people and resources to implement activities, and occasionally assess the progress and direction of the partnership. This group of people should not only represent the larger parish community, but also reach out to

different members and groups in the parish, inviting them to become involved in the partnership according to their interests and gifts (CRS 2011: 6).

Creating a decision-making structure that includes members of the wider community, and not just the pastor, will assist in developing and maintaining local leadership over the projects that the partnership chooses to implement. Local leadership reduces dependence and ensures the future sustainability of the ministries, even if the US partner moves on.

*Assessing the Success of the Mission Based on the Enhanced Capability of the Developing-country Partner to Lead His or Her Own Future Development and Not on the Number of Completed Projects*

In my experience, most US partners in solidarity relationships assess their success based on the numbers of projects they complete. I certainly did. We paid the teacher salaries for 13 schools, shipped 25 cases of school supplies, treated 125 patients, distributed vitamins and school lunches to 500 schoolchildren, etc. All of this is valuable and important. But we failed to ask ourselves the following questions: In what ways have we worked with the community to improve their capacity to pay their own teacher salaries? How have we strategized with the community to improve their local health care delivery system? How have we increased the ability of parents to provide nutritious food to their children? We were operating out of charity-based approach to partnership.

It is essential to our human dignity to provide for our own families. We want to pay our childrens' school fees, to clothe them, to feed them properly, and to care for their health. None of us wants to be permanently dependent on the charity of others to take care of ourselves or our families. If our starting point in reflecting on global mission is the dignity of the human person, then we must move beyond charity and begin to look at solutions that facilitate and enable the community to take responsibility for itself. In other words, the goal of the partnership should be to reduce and ultimately eliminate the need for outside help, except in the case of emergency.

In Baraderes, once we began to ask ourselves the hard questions, the Haitian pastor and I, along with a group from the sister parish in Maryland, worked with a group Baraderes coffee growers to develop a fair trade coffee project, so that they were able to produce export-quality coffee and sell it in the US for a price that enabled them to care for their families. This work involved training and investment, as well as market development in the US. Today, the 100 coffee growers involved in the project are paying their childrens' school fees themselves. They developed a feeding program for people displaced from the 2010 earthquake, paying for it with their own money, funds matched by their US partner. They have also developed a kind of social security program for their members and their families, providing funding for emergency health care and burial expenses. We are working with them toward the time that they will be able to take over the business themselves, without the need for an outside intermediary.

*Evaluating and Addressing Together the Underlying, Unjust Structural Causes That Lead to Poverty for the Developing-country Partner*

Some of the structural causes of poverty are addressed above, in the movement from a charity-based model of intervention that leads to dependency, to a justice and

sustainable development-based model that stresses local economic development as a solution to poverty. In addition, the US partner has a special responsibility to address US policies that may affect global poverty, either positively or negatively. In Colombia, the rural people I interviewed, although largely uneducated and not well travelled, understood very well the extent to which US policies affected them directly. They spoke articulately about *Plan Colombia* (the US aid package) and the need to educate and lobby the US Congress for policies that did not adversely affect poor Colombians. I give frequent presentations about my work in both Colombia and Haiti, and I have found that most US audiences know significantly less about US foreign policy than people overseas whose lives are directly affected.

I suggest that the US partners begin by educating themselves about the policies that may directly affect their partner, and then having conversations with the overseas partner about what they think, discussing ways that they could act together. I have found it to be particularly effective to bring people from overseas whose lives are directly affected to visit members of Congress and tell their personal story. An easy way for Catholics to get involved is to join Catholics Confront Global Poverty ([www.crs.org/ccgp](http://www.crs.org/ccgp)), a program of the US Conference of Catholic Bishops and Catholic Relief Services to help US Catholics get involved in ending global poverty through changes to US policies. Many Protestant denominations have similar advocacy programs.

*Taking Care with the Images Used to Present the Overseas Partner*

While most of us are motivated to help by our exposure to images and stories depicting the effects of poverty and violence on our sisters and brothers overseas, it is important that the images we use and the stories we tell do not violate the dignity of our partners. In the case of Haiti, all too often we see pictures of dirty, poorly clothed people, especially children, on websites or in advertising. These images, while they may be useful for fundraising, do not present Haiti or Haitians in their full dignity as children of God. Haitian parents take great care to send their children to school well groomed and in crisp uniforms. During one long trek up the rural mountains of Haiti, at the top, exhausted and sweaty, I was greeted by a Haitian family in an immaculate straw house serving me coffee in porcelain cups. Presenting a truer picture of the dignity of our overseas partners will provide the foundation for ministries that also respect their dignity. For example, we can depict Haiti positively, as a hard-working country that values education, rich in agricultural resources that could be a good source of income for the average Haitian if suitably developed.

**Conclusion**

Solidarity partnership between a community in a developed country and one in a developing country has enormous potential to be transformational on both sides. It can remove both parties from their isolation of each other and deepen mutual understanding and care. It can also contribute to a reduction in the poverty and suffering of the community in the developing world, and increase understanding among those from the developed country of the root causes of that poverty.

We have seen that both parties desire the relationships but that they are not always implemented in ways that actually benefit the materially poor community in the long

run. People from a wealthier context want to help, but they often do it in ways that create dependencies and undermine local leadership development. People from a materially poor context want assistance, but they want to be more than just objects of charity in the eyes of those who give.

I am suggesting that we ground the practice of solidarity in a spirituality of accompaniment. A spirituality of accompaniment begins with a reflection on Genesis chapter 1, where we learn that God does not think that “my own” voice is the only important one at the table. As we learn to express a relationship with God’s human creation in the ways that God expresses a relationship with us—through presence, community, and service—we also learn a practice of solidarity that seeks to safeguard the dignity of the other. A focus on the dignity of the other can transform our development ministries from those that perpetuate divisions and poverty by creating dependencies, to those that truly heed the plea of “Called to Global Solidarity” for the rich to bind themselves to the poor, overcoming the divisions in our world.

### Notes

1. From 1997 to 2004, I directed the social justice and global solidarity ministries of a large Catholic parish in Silver Spring, Maryland. A portion of my time was spent developing and managing the parish partnership with the community of Baraderes, Haiti. At the request of the Haitian parish priest, the bulk of the resources we contributed were spent on programs to alleviate the effects of poverty, such as sponsoring medical missions and paying teacher salaries. In my experience, these and other development ministries are typical for most solidarity partnership relationships and usually involve the US partner raising funds to pay for a program.

2. This figure is an unreliable estimate, based on the only study currently available on the topic. The numbers are provided merely to give the reader a ballpark idea of the scope of parish twinning alone.

3. “The Church’s teaching on international justice and peace is not simply a mandate for a few large agencies, but a challenge for every believer and every Catholic community of faith. The demands of solidarity require not another program, but greater awareness and integration into the ongoing life of the parish. The Church’s universal character can be better reflected in how every parish prays, educates, serves, and acts. A parish reaching beyond its own members and beyond national boundaries is a truly “catholic” parish. An important role for the parish is to challenge and encourage every believer to greater global solidarity”(USCCB 1997).

4. Document is undated, but was signed at a gathering of Haitian bishops and Church representatives from the United States, Mexico, the Holy See, Argentina, Colombia, France, Dominican Republic, El Salvador, and Germany on September 21–22, 2010.

5. For lengthy descriptions of one failed project in Haiti after another, see Schwartz, Timothy, *Travesty in Haiti: A True Account of Christian Missions, Orphanages, Food Aid, Fraud, and Drug Trafficking*, 2nd Edition, 2010 (self-published).

6. Their list includes: involvement of diocesan offices, approval of the whole parish (including the pastor and bishop) and not just one individual or committee, establishing a covenant agreement between the partners, working through intermediary organizations to achieve goals, establish good communication practices, address issues of accountability, thorough formation for visiting delegations, and moving beyond a charity model to one of mutuality and equality.

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