



## East African Journal of Traditions, Culture and Religion

[ejtr.eanso.org](http://ejtr.eanso.org)

Volume 6, Issue 1, 2023

Print ISSN: 2707-5362 | Online ISSN: 2707-5370

Title DOI: <https://doi.org/10.37284/2707-5370>

**ENSO**

EAST AFRICAN  
NATURE &  
SCIENCE  
ORGANIZATION

Original Article

## Solidarity in Catholic Social Teaching and Its Implications for Creating an Authentic Human Self

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Article DOI: <https://doi.org/10.37284/eajtr.6.1.1285>

### Date Published: ABSTRACT

03 July 2023

### Keywords:

Solidarity,  
Catholic,  
Social,  
Teaching,  
Catholic Social Teaching,  
Catholic Social Thought,  
Human,  
Self.

The human self has been narrowly and erroneously understood in some quarters as simply purely scientific, naturalistic, individualistic, and materialistic. This understanding of the self has contributed to problems like selfishness, rugged individualism, materialism, get-rich-quick syndrome, ritual killings, genocidal wars, profiteering, and so forth. If these erroneous perceptions of the human person or self are left unchallenged, they will continue to degrade human society and dignity. This paper theorizes that the Catholic understanding of the human being as a social and communal being, thus implying solidarity, can help to recover the authentic human self. In this light, this paper uses the methods of critical analyses and hermeneutics to examine the Catholic understanding of solidarity and how it can help in retrieving the authentic human self. The paper finds that there are erroneous and narrow understandings of the human self and person. It concludes that the Catholic concept of solidarity can help to build an authentic human self and society.

### APA CITATION

Ikeke, O. (2023). Solidarity in Catholic Social Teaching and Its Implications for Creating an Authentic Human Self *East African Journal of Traditions, Culture and Religion*, 6(1), 65-74. <https://doi.org/10.37284/eajtr.6.1.1285>

### CHICAGO CITATION

Ikeke, Omorovie. "Solidarity in Catholic Social Teaching and Its Implications for Creating an Authentic Human Self". *East African Journal of Traditions, Culture and Religion* 6 (1), 65-74. <https://doi.org/10.37284/eajtr.6.1.1285>.

### HARVARD CITATION

Ikeke, O. (2023) "Solidarity in Catholic Social Teaching and Its Implications for Creating an Authentic Human Self", *East African Journal of Traditions, Culture and Religion*, 6(1), pp. 65-74. doi: 10.37284/eajtr.6.1.1285.

### IEEE CITATION

O. Ikeke, "Solidarity in Catholic Social Teaching and Its Implications for Creating an Authentic Human Self", *EAJTR*, vol. 6, no. 1, pp. 65-74, Jul. 2023.

### MLA CITATION

Ikeke, Omorovie. "Solidarity in Catholic Social Teaching and Its Implications for Creating an Authentic Human Self". *East African Journal of Traditions, Culture and Religion*, Vol. 6, no. 1, Jul. 2023, pp. 65-74, doi:10.37284/eajtr.6.1.1285.

## INTRODUCTION

Francis (2020) writes that the contemporary world is inundated with globalized indifference instead of a recognition of human togetherness and sociality. Humanity is passing through troubled times inspired by nihilistic or anarchistic ideologies and beliefs rooted in rugged individualism, scientific materialism, and self-centred selfishness. These beliefs pay hedonistic attention to the worship of material progress no matter the cost, celebrate the profane in as far as it brings pleasure, and glorifies capitalistic profiteering even when it damages the lives of people and destroys the environment. While the lands in which oil and other mineral resources are mined or drilled suffer from environmental degradation and the lives of the people in the communities are impoverished, the multinational corporations are earning great amounts of financial income without caring much for the social good. The world is also troubled by practices like abortions, sexual permissiveness, and extreme libertarianism. If it seems good to you, do it. If it seems pleasurable, do it. Understanding the human self from these narrow and secularistic perspectives poses a grave danger for human society. It has led to more militarism, dictatorships, and the destruction of indigenous cultures.

This paper argues that a true understanding of the human self is more than needed today to stem the tide of transhuman and postmodern worlds in which everything is right and there is no absolute basis for morality. When life is rooted in relativism, it might become right, the poor and vulnerable are endangered, and the environmental welfare is compromised. The paper argues that a true understanding of the human self must see the human person in social and communitarian dimensions. In this light, the paper examines the concept of solidarity in Catholic social thought/teaching and its implications for the contemporary world.

## CONCEPTUAL CLARIFICATIONS AND ANALYSIS

Key concepts that inform this paper are solidarity, Catholic social teaching, Catholic social thought, and the authentic human self. Ladha (2020) rightly notes that from its etymology, the word “solidarity” comes from “solidus”, which meant an accounting unit in ancient Rome. It became merged with the French “solidaire” (interdependence) and later into English, meaning agreement, support, and bond of unity. IGI Global (2023) describes solidarity in the following ways: likeminded feeling, people of common interest living and being/ acting together, unity to achieve common interests for the benefit of all, social values that foster cooperation, cohesiveness, harmony, cohesion, and team spirit; sharing helping and supporting one another, belongingness. Hobgood (2007b) opines that solidarity implies accountability to all those involved in the liberation struggle; and arises from the fact that the welfare of human beings, their social structures, and their existence are all interrelated.

The next term that requires clarification is Catholic social teaching (CST). CST refers to the body of official Catholic teachings that deal with building a just and peaceful society and social holiness. Wright (2017) writes that: “Catholic social teaching (CST), a branch of moral theology, addresses contemporary issues within the political, economic, and cultural structures of society. The threefold cornerstone of CST contains the principles of human dignity, solidarity, and subsidiarity” (p. 10). The US Catholic Bishops (1998) state that:

*The Church’s social teaching is a rich treasure of wisdom about building a just society and living lives of holiness amidst the challenges of modern society. It offers moral principles and coherent values that are badly needed in our time. In this time of widespread violence and diminished respect for human life and dignity in our country and around the world, the Gospel of life and the biblical call to justice need to be*

*proclaimed and shared with new clarity, urgency, and energy.*

The US Catholic Bishops enunciates the seven main themes in CST as- life and dignity of the human person; call to family, community, and participation; rights and responsibilities; option for the poor and vulnerable; dignity and rights of workers, solidarity; and care for God's creation. Hobgood (2007a) rightly states that CST is "A tradition of the teaching contained in the pastoral letters of national and regional bodies of bishops and the encyclical letters of popes", and it "focuses on the relationship between God, people, and the world. It pays specific attention to issues of family, and economic, political, and cultural life" (p. 211). Aniagwu (2011) writes that: "The social teaching of the church is a body of prophetic statements that have been made by the teaching authority of the Catholic Church...since her inception, but especially over the past 120 years" (p. 270).

Catholic social teaching can be dated back to the release of the encyclical, *Rerum Novarum*, in 1891 by Pope Leo XIII, in which he dealt with the exploitation of workers that had arisen from the industrial revolution. The following ideas from Hobgood (2007b) apply to CST: (1) a major aspect of CST concerns the marginalized and oppressed under capitalism, (2) dated from the 19<sup>th</sup> century, modern CST was a response to socialist aspirations of persons suffering economic and political oppression in new industrial capitalist societies, (3) in the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century the attention was to plights of the poor in so-called 3<sup>rd</sup> world countries, (4) most recently it is engaging the problems of structural unemployment, and underemployment in 3<sup>rd</sup> world countries and economic insecurity in the 1<sup>st</sup> world. CST is critical of the negative aspects of capitalism and privileges respect for the common good and social justice. The Vatican (1965) states the catholic social attitude when they write:

*The joys and the hopes, the griefs and the anxieties of the men of this age, especially those who are poor or in any way afflicted, these are*

*the joys and hopes, the griefs and anxieties of the followers of Christ. Indeed, nothing genuinely human fails to raise an echo in their hearts. For theirs is a community composed of men. United in Christ, they are led by the Holy Spirit in their journey to the Kingdom of their Father and they have welcomed the news of salvation which is meant for every man. That is why this community realizes that it is truly linked with mankind and its history by the deepest of bonds (p. 1)*

Catholic Social thought designates the commentaries, reflections, and discourses on CST. While CST is the official teaching coming from the Church's magisterium, catholic social thought is not official but can be the views of theologians, philosophers, and other scholars on the official social teaching. The many documents that constitute CST include: *Rerum Novarum: The Condition of Labor* (Leo XIII, 1891); *Quadragesimo Anno: After Forty Years* (Pius XI, 1931); *Mater et Magistra: Christianity and Social Progress* (John XXIII, 1963); *Pacem in Terris: Peace on Earth* (John XXIII, 1963); *Gaudium et Spes: Pastoral Constitution on the Church in Modern World* (Second Vatican Council, 1965); *Populorum Progressio: On the Development of Peoples* (Paul VI, 1967); *Octogesima Adveniens: A Call to Action on the Eightieth Anniversary of Rerum Novarum* (Paul VI, 1971); *Justice in the World* (Synod of Bishops, 1971); *Evangelii Nuntiandi: Evangelization in the Modern World* (Paul VI, 1975); *Laborem Exercens: On Human Work* (1981); *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis: On Social Concern* (1987); *Centesimus Annus: On the Hundredth Anniversary of Rerum Novarum* (1991); *The Challenge of Peace: God's Promise and Our Response* (U.S. Catholic Bishops, 1983); *Economic Justice for All* (U.S. Catholic Bishops, 1986); *Dignitatis Humanae, Declaration on Religious Freedom* (Second Vatican Council, 1965). Though we generally trace CST to *Rerum Novarum* (new things), Aniagwu (2011) rightly argues that social teaching can be traced beyond the founding of the church, the ministry of Jesus to the

Exodus event, in which God decisively acts and opts for the freedom of the people of Israel from oppression in Egypt.

What is an authentic self? Or what is the authentic human self? The self can be defined in different ways. It is one of the most difficult concepts to define. The Open Education Sociology Dictionary (2023) states that self refers to a person's sense of his being and as distinct from others. Study Smarter (n.d) states that in the psychology of personality, the self refers to the whole individual with attributes, consciousness, mentality, and characteristics, and this self is developed through the process of individuation (the process of becoming a unique person, including both conscious and unconscious selves). Your sense of self, understanding of yourself and your place in this world, and how you see the world is determined a great deal by the developmental and formation process. This developmental process includes all the socialization processes that the individual undergoes. Invariably then, your sense of self affects how you live and behave, whether you see yourself as a solitary individual and that only your needs count or you see yourself within the communitarian social context.

Somebody can grow developing a relativist and materialist self that takes into consideration only what will benefit him/herself. Ramalingam (2006) opines that the self is "...the sense of personality or ego, regarded as an agent, conscious of his own continuing identity" (p. 242). Yogapedia (2016) says: "The Self is what makes someone an individual; it is the essential being of a person, one's ego, and the awareness of one's inner person", and the two parts of the self are the ego (lower self) made up of the temporary body of five senses, opinions, and changing thoughts; while the second part is the true or higher self, the essential core of a person that is unchanging". Your sense of self, personhood, or what type of person you are, as Abercrombie, Hill, and Turner (2000) state, is your identity. This identity shares both elements of difference and sameness.

The term human self seems like a tautology. To be human is to have a self. But for the sake of emphasis, people can speak of the human self. The authentic self is the self that is true to the real purpose of human existence on Earth. If a human being understands/perceives himself/herself as simply in this world to satisfy his gluttonous and greedy appetites, then he/she will live a life of debauchery and vain prodigality without concern for others. This often leads to a life of wickedness and social deviance. Within the context of Christian revelation, it is the self that lives out an authentic human life following Christian values and principles. This authentic self is not selfish or lives to hedonistically glorify the self. It lives for the glory of God and the wellbeing and good of others. This is a Christian self as exemplified in the life and ministry of Jesus, who lived an authentic human life that was of service to God and humanity. Authentic human life promotes justice, peace, community health, and true freedom for all people. Trueman (2020) writes that the Christian self is radically different from the modern hedonistic self rooted in postmodern and plurality of relativistic ideologies.

Many factors can be adduced for the many crises in the contemporary world, whether it may be the environmental crisis, the rise of terrorism, the increase in the rate of suicide, capitalist devastation of indigenous cultures, colonial devastation of the environment, or extreme forms of globalization. These factors include post-modernism, westernization, and capitalist globalization; understanding the human self as a solitary, individualistic, atomic person is not a phenomenon that comes from time immemorial. This immediate idea is indicated by Alpert (2020). It is also different from how the human self was understood in indigenous philosophies, theologies, and cultural traditions. In indigenous philosophies such as those of the Native Americans, the Africans, and many Asian traditions, the human self is always seen and related to the communal and cosmic reality. In African culture, Okolo (2003) states that the human self or person is a being with others. African

concepts such as *Ubuntu* (I am only a person because of others), *Ukama* (I am a person because of everything in existence), Communalism, *Ujamaa* (brotherhood), and Humanism all express this reality.

### **Catholic Understanding of the Self in the Light of Solidarity**

The focus of this paper is not on the concept of the self in other non-Catholic philosophies and traditions. That can be the focus of another paper. It is wrong to separate the self from the human person. Whatever is said about the human person is equally said about the self. Smith (2020) writes that those who affirm the modern self-assert that the human person consists of bare autonomous self-defining consciousness unconnected to religion, social role, biology, etc. It is free of any exterior to it. By implication, this self denies the spiritual, theological, and the divine. He argues further that the self-experience of memories and images related to the outside itself and the consciousness of self is always related to others. Smith (2020) writes:

*... we need to recognize that the human person is not reducible to any of his parts. The human person is not an ego, ghost in the machine, or isolated consciousness. Although it is true that the rational soul is naturally undying, outside of God's grace the separated soul is in a deficient ghostly state. This is why the resurrection of the body is a reasonable Christian belief. The subject of my actions, passions, and relationships is not some mental entity inside of me, it is the whole person — body and soul. It is so important in this matter to recover the form-matter unity of the human person. A human person has a soul, but he is not simply or essentially a soul. Likewise, the human person is not reducible to the body. The fundamental identity of the human person (philosophically speaking) is the living, rational body. This is what I call the classical-Christian view. This is important because the body is objective and*

*verifiable and the body has a history and definite relations (par .5).*

The human self is created relational. You are only a person or self in relation to God your Creator, the human community, and the entire cosmic community. The paper does not infer this is the only dimension of the human person or self. But this is important. The Catholic understanding of solidarity sees it as social love, friendship, and fraternity. Miller (2022) writes, “This principle is frequently stated by Pope Leo XIII, who uses the term ‘friendship’, a concept already found in Greek philosophy. Pope Pius XI refers to it with the equally meaningful term ‘social charity’. Pope Paul VI, expanding the concept to cover the many modern aspects of the social question, speaks of a ‘civilization of love’” (par. 4).

Solidarity derives from the testimony of the biblical tradition. It does not begin with ecclesial teaching. It flows from the Judeo-Christian scriptures. God creates human beings in divine solidarity to share in the life and mission of the blessed Trinity. The scriptures are a communitarian book, not an individualistic book. God expected Cain to show concern for his brother when he asked: “Where is Abel, your brother?” (Gen 4:10). Abraham is called to be the father of the nations and to be a blessing. Joseph is sent to Egypt a foreign country to save the whole world. God says to Israel at Mount Sinai, “All the earth is mine” (Exo 19:5). Israel is commanded to show solicitude to the poor, the stranger, Leviticus 19 says: “If a resident alien lives with you in your land, you are not to mistreat him. You are to treat the resident alien the same way you treat the native-born among you—love him like yourself since you were foreigners in the land of Egypt” (verses 33-34). Moses is called to fight and struggle against Pharaonic oppression and bondage, etc. Jesus is a man of solidarity. He stood in solidarity with humanity. Writing of how Jesus is the epitome of solidarity, the Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace (PCJP) (2004) states that:

*Jesus of Nazareth makes the connection between solidarity and charity shine brightly before all, illuminating the entire meaning of this connection [424]: “In the light of faith, solidarity seeks to go beyond itself, to take on the specifically Christian dimensions of total gratuity, forgiveness, and reconciliation. One’s neighbour is then not only a human being with his or her own rights and fundamental equality with everyone else but becomes the living image of God the Father, redeemed by the blood of Jesus Christ and placed under the permanent action of the Holy Spirit. One’s neighbour must therefore be loved, even if an enemy, with the same love with which the Lord loves him or her; and for that person’s sake, one must be ready for sacrifice, even the ultimate one: to lay down one’s life for the brethren ... (p. 104).*

A foundation of solidarity is in the essence of the human person. God the Creator created human beings in His own image and likeness (Genesis 1:26), and they are to share in His life. The human person is created in the image of the Blessed Trinity. Development and Peace Caritas Canada (n.d) states that: “Each of us is part of the human family, and we are all interconnected and interdependent. Loving our neighbour has global dimensions. We must see ourselves in others and collaborate toward solutions. Solidarity is a recognition that we are ‘all in this together’, and is a commitment to strengthen community and promote a just society” (p. 1). PCJP (2004) states that solidarity is intrinsic to the social nature of human persons and relates to the interdependence of human persons and the bond of unity. The PCJP (2004) relates that despite the advancement in information communication technology that has brought human persons nearer to one another, there is growing exploitation, corruption, and oppression. In the middle of all these, there is a need for the promotion of ethical values more than ever before now. The PCJP (2004) states that: “The new relationships of interdependence between individuals and peoples, which are de facto forms of solidarity, have to be

transformed into relationships tending towards genuine ethical-social solidarity. This is a moral requirement inherent within all human relationships” (p. 106).

In CST solidarity is a virtue and a moral requirement. It is not optional to have and live in solidarity. By the very fact of being a human being, you are to live in solidarity. PCJP (2004) Paul teaches that: Solidarity is not a feeling of vague compassion or shallow distress at the misfortunes of so many people, both near and far. On the contrary, 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 really responsible for all” (pp. 106-107). The PCJP (2004) states number 195 as follows:

*The principle of solidarity requires that men and women of our day cultivate a greater awareness that they are debtors of the society of which they have become part. They are debtors because of those conditions that make human existence liveable and because of the indivisible and indispensable legacy constituted by culture, scientific and technical knowledge, material and immaterial goods and by all that the human condition has produced. A similar debt must be recognized in the various forms of social interaction so that humanity’s journey will not be interrupted but remain open to present and future generations, all of them called together to share the same gift in solidarity (p. 108).*

Francis (2014) writes that solidarity implies communitarian concerns, fighting against structures of poverty, inequality, oppression, etc. In a similar tone, the US Catholic Bishops (1986) state that human solidarity promotes love and the creation of political and economic structures that promote human welfare. John (1961) enunciates that:

*The solidarity which binds all men together as members of a common family makes it impossible for wealthy nations to look with indifference upon the hunger, misery, and*

*poverty of other nations whose citizens are unable to enjoy even elementary human rights. The nations of the world are becoming more and more dependent on one another and it will not be possible to preserve a lasting peace so long as glaring economic and social imbalances persist (no 157)*

An understanding of the Catholic conceptualization of solidarity comes out in the Catechism of the Catholic Church commentary on the seventh commandment.

### **Solidarity and Its Implications for Creating an Authentic Human Self**

Writing of a world that is filled with many forms of meaninglessness and abuse of power against the oppressed and marginalized, Ladha (2020) writes that:

*This requires a de-colonization of one's entire being. It is an ongoing praxis of deprogramming old constructs of greed, selfishness, short-termism, extraction, commodification, usury, disconnection, numbing and other life-denying tendencies. And reprogramming our mind-soul-heart-body complex with intrinsic values such as interdependence, altruism, generosity, cooperation, empathy, non-violence, and solidarity with all life.*

Reflecting further on the implications of solidarity, he writes:

*How does this apply to the politics of solidarity in practical terms? Every time we focus on a single issue that matters to us (e.g., lower corporate taxes, mandatory vaccinations, elite pedophilia rings, etc.) without examining the larger machinations of power or the interests we ally ourselves with (i.e., associational politics), we remove the possibility of true structural change. Every time we defend capitalism as a source of innovation or the "best-worst system" we have, we dishonor the*

*8000 species that go extinct every year and the majority of humanity that are suffering under the yoke of growth-based imperialism. Every time we say that some poverty will always exist, we condemn our fellow humans because of our own ignorance. Every time we say that we have the world we have because of human nature, we are amputating human ingenuity, connection, empathy, and possibility.*

Solidarity is not just a state of being or feeling good. It requires action, especially action against injustice and oppression. A negative understanding of the human self in solitary and individualistic parlance has led to things like ancient forms of slavery, modern-day slavery, Apartheid, racism, etc. A proper understanding of the human self as being in solidarity with other human beings then necessarily requires acting for the good and wellbeing of those human beings. Tseng (2021) cites Deepa Iyer and Kim Tran to aver that solidarity is more than feeling good or allyship; rather, it is transformative solidarity that disrupts the social status quo and unjust systems, and it is a life-long walk. True human solidarity sticks it out with those who are oppressed and work for their good and wellbeing. Solidarity is at work when people fight against unjust systems such as Apartheid, racial segregation, Jim Crow laws, colonialism, slavery, etc. Writing of the implications of solidarity, especially as it pertains to the poor, oppressed, and vulnerable, Francis (2015) states:

*In the present condition of global society, where injustices abound, and growing numbers of people are deprived of basic human rights and considered expendable, the principle of the common good immediately becomes, logically and inevitably, a summons to solidarity and a preferential option for the poorest of our brothers and sisters. This option entails recognizing the implications of the universal destination of the world's goods, but, as I mentioned in the Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium*, it demands before all else*

*an appreciation of the immense dignity of the poor in the light of our deepest convictions as believers. We need only look around us to see that, today, this option is, in fact, an ethical imperative essential for effectively attaining the common good.*

Rightly solidarity counters individualism, materialism, and self-centred philosophies of life. Hobgood (2007) writes that: “Solidarity stands in contrast to the notion of altruism in liberal theological ethics that sees the individual as solitary and unrelated to larger social systems and maintains the self/another split according to the worldview of Western dualism” (p. 1307).

Another implication of solidarity has to do with the environmental or ecological crisis. Human beings are also created in connection with the earth. The physical human body was fashioned from the dust of the earth (Genesis 2:7). Humans depend on the earth and its resources for their sustenance on earth. Human interdependence is also with the non-human world and beings in the universe. A self-isolated self that thinks only about its own interest and not the broader social or communal good is a sick self. A self that seeks profit at the expense of other human beings is an unhealthy self. A self that destroys the environment without thinking of sustainability is myopic.

A fundamental implication of solidarity is social love and a life of sharing goods and resources. This is so because, created as communal beings, God the Creator intended that the bounty of creation is for the benefit of all human beings not simply for the rich and powerful. The Holy See (1994) affirms as follows:

*The seventh commandment forbids unjustly taking or keeping the goods of one's neighbour and wronging him in any way with respect to his goods. It commands justice and charity in the care of earthly goods and the fruits of men's labor. For the sake of the common good, it requires respect for the universal destination of*

*goods and respect for the right to private property. Christian life strives to order this world's goods to God and to fraternal charity. In the beginning God entrusted the earth and its resources to the common stewardship of mankind to take care of them, master them by labor, and enjoy their fruits. The goods of creation are destined for the whole human race. However, the earth is divided up among men to assure the security of their lives, endangered by poverty and threatened by violence. The appropriation of property is legitimate for guaranteeing the freedom and dignity of persons and for helping each of them to meet his basic needs and the needs of those in his charge. It should allow for a natural solidarity to develop between men (p. 577)*

The human being is not destined or created to be an individualistic solitary being who seeks only his/her interest. You should not sit by while others are suffering and in pain. Every human being is called to live out the seven spiritual and seven corporal works of mercy. If the human being is not to be understood in his/her social self, Jesus will not make a fundamental basis of the last judgment the corporal works of mercy (Matthew 25). The Holy See (1994) states regarding the petition in the Lord's Prayer, “Give us today Our daily bread”, “But the presence of those who hunger, because they lack bread, opens another profound meaning of this petition. The drama of hunger in the world calls Christians who pray sincerely to exercise responsibility toward their brethren, both in their personal behaviour and in their solidarity with the human family. This petition of the Lord's Prayer cannot be isolated from the parables of the poor man Lazarus and of the Last Judgment” (p. 679). It is all a question of solidarity; human beings should act in social concertedness to ameliorate or end human suffering. They act to end violence and wars, racism and ethnicism, injustice and oppression, poverty, and degradation, etc. Solidarity calls people to a life of sharing. Benedict (2008) states that: “Solidarity refers to the virtue enabling the human family to



share the treasure of material and spiritual goods fully” Francis (2013b) says solidarity “requires you to look at another and to give yourself to another with love”. Benedict (2005b) says solidarity requires that we are to encounter those “whom I do not like or even know”. Wright (2017) writes that solidarity makes one identify the other human being, even the patient in the health care facility as deserving consideration and attention and this help us to transcend social, political, cultural, and geographic difference and embrace the other person/self as thyself”.

## CONCLUSION

The paper has examined the concept of solidarity in Catholic Social Teaching in relation to creating an authentic human self. The paper presented solidarity as an ethical value that recognizes human inter-relatedness and acts for the wellbeing and promotion of the human person and also environmental wellbeing. Solidarity is a central core issue in CST. The paper argued that an authentic human self is not individualistic rather, it sees itself as communal and also social. It does not deny the individuality of the individual but reorders the individual to keep in mind its social dimension. A practice of solidarity will help reorder our world and promote a just, peaceful, and harmonious world.

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