

## Women in Solidarity for The Common Good

Solidarity and concern for the common good are central tenets of Catholic social teaching. They both point us to consider the “we” over the “me.” They are both based on the belief that every human person is created in the image of God and thus has a dignity and rights that must be protected and promoted. The principle of the common good posits that the good of each human person is intimately related to the good of the whole community; this principle recognizes that all persons must contribute to life in society, and all persons must share in the mutual benefits of life in society.<sup>1</sup> Indeed, individuals cannot fully flourish if they are not actively involved with promoting human flourishing for all.

Solidarity has been defined by Pope John Paul II as “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.”<sup>2</sup> Solidarity builds community that empowers people to attain their full potential; it is developed through respect for everyone’s human dignity and their human rights. Solidarity means, as the U.S. Bishops remind us, that we are our sisters’ and brothers’ keepers, and if one suffers, then all of us suffer.<sup>3</sup>



Photo credit: Nic McPhee from Morris, Minnesota, USA (Morris Women’s March (69)) [CC BY-SA 2.0], via Wikimedia Commons.

### A Century Ago

There has been a long tradition of women working in solidarity for the common good, and recent movements are very much a part of this long tradition. Around a century ago in the U.S., women factory workers, including immigrants from over 25 countries, led the Bread and Roses strike in 1912 for better working conditions for all workers.<sup>4</sup> Before and after the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory fire in 1911, women, many of them immigrants or the daughters of immigrants, led strikes in New York City to advocate for rights for women and men who worked in unsafe and demeaning conditions.<sup>5</sup> During this time period, other immigrant women were taking part in many flourishing ethnic women’s organizations, such as the Polish Women’s Alliance of America and the Slovenian Women’s Union; these organizations benefitted not only the female members but their entire communities in a wide variety of ways. In 1915, the Women’s International League for Peace and Freedom (WILPF) was established by women from different countries and cultures to work together for world disarmament, racial and economic justice, and an end to all forms of violence so that all women, men, and children could live and flourish in peace.<sup>6</sup>

### Solidarity Today

Women continue to be involved in social justice efforts. The Coalition of Labor Union Women will gather to lobby in April, 2019 to lobby Congress for a just and living minimum wage, for national health care, for paid family leave and for paycheck fairness. They will meet with members of a Congress

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that has more women serving than ever before. In 2018, women candidates and women voters worked to promote many issues that would benefit women, men and children, promote equity, justice and peace, and to ensure that everyone who can vote is registered and be able to get to the polls: these efforts were successful as record numbers of women were elected. Women’s growing interest in the power of the polls was in a large part due to the Women’s March movement, which promoted more active involvement of women in local and national politics. Citizen engagement with our democracy and supporting the right to vote are central to the common good, as is a sensitivity to the social concerns of the times. The Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church reminds us that the demands of common good are “dependent of the social concerns of each historical period,” especially when there are questions about “the commitment to peace, the organization of the State’s powers, a sound juridical system, the protection of the environment, and the provision of essential services [including decent work, housing, healthcare] to all.”<sup>77</sup> The Compendium also notes that citizens must hold their governments responsible for “the contribution that every nation is required in duty to make towards a true worldwide cooperation for the common good of the whole of humanity and for future generations.”<sup>78</sup> Given what is happening at this historical moment in the United States, we are called to support candidates and elected officials who honor the values of international cooperation and peace, just democratic institutions, healthcare, care for the environment—and who support the right of all to vote and have access to voting places.

The Me Too movement has continued to contribute to the common good: living in a society where verbal and physical harassment and abuse is not tolerated will be positive for all members of our society. Demanding that everyone receives respect in the workplace, and every place, is very much a value supported by Catholic social teaching. The Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church notes that “The rights of workers, like all other rights, are based on the nature of the human person and on their transcendent dignity.”<sup>79</sup> These rights include “a working environment and manufacturing processes which are not harmful to the workers’ physical health or to their moral integrity; the right that one’s personality in the



workplace should be safeguarded without suffering any affront to one’s conscience or personal dignity.”<sup>10</sup> New light has been shed on the challenges women (many who are immigrants) in low-paying employment face who are abused but cannot afford to speak up and lose their jobs (and in some cases, be deported) and more attention is being paid to the personal dignity of women in the food industry, the hospitality industry, in domestic and caregiving work as well as female workers in factory jobs. Women are also working together to end the abuse of sex trafficking, which Pope Francis has called “a crime against humanity”: women religious in this country have organized the U.S. Catholic Sisters Against Human Trafficking and are taking leadership in advocacy and action in this movement.

When Pope Francis visited the United States in 2015, he gave an address to the Members of Congress, declaring that the proper response to the concerns of our day must be “one of hope and healing, of peace and justice ... our efforts must aim at restoring hope, righting wrongs, maintaining commitments, and thus promoting the wellbeing of individuals and of peoples.”<sup>11</sup> He called for a new spirit of community and solidarity, calling on Americans to “cooperate generously for the common good.”<sup>12</sup> Francis ended his address saying a nation “can be considered great” when it defends liberty, builds a culture which enables people to dream of full rights for all their brothers and sisters, strives for justice for the oppressed and sows peace.<sup>13</sup> We pray that the women in the United States who are working to realize these same aims can make the country good, or even authentically great, again.

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## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church, 2004, #164-167, <http://bit.ly/2EvHuJX>.

<sup>2</sup> John Paul II, *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis*, December 30, 1987, #38, <http://bit.ly/1NLLh2f>.

<sup>3</sup> Solidarity, U.S. Catholic Bishops, <http://bit.ly/28JB3X7>.

<sup>4</sup> Lyn, “Neeley, Bread & Roses: The Strike Led and Won by Women,” Hartford Web Publishing, January 29, 1998, <http://bit.ly/2DXV7U5>.

<sup>5</sup> “Triangle Shirtwaist Fire,” AFL-CIO, <http://bit.ly/2nrl3OL>.

<sup>6</sup> “History: WILPE celebrated 100 years in 2015,” Women’s Interfaith League for Peace and Freedom, <http://bit.ly/2nqbONL>.

<sup>7</sup> Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church, 2004, #350, <http://bit.ly/2EvHuJX>.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, #351.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, #301.

<sup>10</sup> Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church, 2004, #301, <http://bit.ly/2EvHuJX>.

<sup>11</sup> Ryan Teague Beckwith, “Transcript: Read the Speech Pope Francis Gave to Congress,” *Time*, September 24, 2015, <http://ti.me/1OUVblB>.

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## Discussion Questions

- Do you know of other groups and movements in history that are example of women in solidarity working for the common good? What groups of women are working in that spirit today?
- Why do you think it has taken so long for women to start breaking the silences about harassment and abusive speech and behavior in the workplace? How would our entire society benefit if women were always respected in the workplace?
- Why is voting considered a human right? Why is voting so important in a democracy? What do you know about problems some U.S. citizens have faced, and sometimes still face, when they attempt to vote?
- Why is it important to have many qualified candidates who are committed to the common good run for office? Why does the U.S. even in 2019 have such a low percentage of female Congress members compared to other countries (over 60 countries have more representation of women in their governing bodies)? How do you think greater numbers of women candidates will benefit this country?





## FAITH IN ACTION

- Learn more about the law and sexual harassment in the workplace, and share what you know widely: <http://bit.ly/1nE1yxZ>.
- See the League of Women Voters website to learn how you can advocate for voting rights for all U.S. citizens and how you can become involved in the next election: <http://bit.ly/2nt1x3j>.

## PRAYER

Creator God, who made women and men in your own image, guide us to recognize in our culture all that promotes and allows harassment and abusive behavior. Give us the courage to confront all that demeans the human dignity of any woman or man. Bless all those who choose the path of solidarity to restore and renew the common good; may we support their efforts to build a more just and democratic society, where all can flourish, and where violence has no place. Hear our prayers, restore our nation's sense of dignity, support our efforts to work for positive change. Amen.