

# The Urgent Call for Solidarity in Sri Lanka: Applying John Paul II's Vision of Solidarity to the Sri Lankan Context

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## Abstract

*This paper explores the relevance of John Paul II's concept of solidarity in addressing the socio-economic and political crises in Sri Lanka. It argues that Sri Lanka's prolonged ethnic conflict, economic disparity, and systemic corruption, the current economic crisis, demand a renewed commitment to solidarity as a framework for rebuilding the nation. Drawing on John Paul II's encyclical *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis* (1987), the paper contextualizes his vision of solidarity as a moral antidote to the "structures of sin" that perpetuate social divisions, poverty, and injustice.*

*Through a historical and theological analysis, this paper examines the causes of Sri Lanka's ethnic and political crises and proposes solidarity to foster ethnic reconciliation, economic justice, and peace. It discusses the critical need for inclusivity, particularly in language, education, and governance, as well as the formation of Basic Human Communities (BHCs) to promote interethnic and interfaith dialogue. It emphasizes the Church's role in advocating for social justice and inclusivity as essential to dismantling structures of discrimination and promoting human flourishing. In conclusion, the paper argues that John Paul II's vision of solidarity, rooted in the recognition of universal human dignity and interconnectedness and shared humanity, offers a transformative path toward national unity and authentic development in Sri Lanka, highlighting the urgency of embracing solidarity in the face of the nation's profound challenges.*

Key words: Structures of sin, economic and political crisis, solidarity, inclusivity, authentic development

## 1. Introduction

Sri Lanka is often described as a pearl in the Indian Ocean, with great potential to become a leading nation in South Asia. As Shanthi Mendis noted, the country was once "on its way to becoming an upper-middle-income nation" (Mendis, 2022, p. ix). However, decades of ethnic conflict, political instability, social inequality, and pervasive corruption have left Sri Lanka economically paralyzed since gaining independence in 1948, jeopardizing the future of its 22 million inhabitants (Mendis, 2022, p. ix). The Catholic Bishops' Conference of Sri Lanka (CBCSL) has highlighted the alarming deterioration of the country's situation, stating that "many people are on the brink of starvation" (CBCSL, 2023, p. 1). This echoes their 2012 statement, which acknowledged the harsh reality of poverty: "Even though exact statistics may be disputed, malnutrition does exist in Sri Lanka. There are families who cannot manage even one proper meal a day" (CBCSL, 2012, p. 8). The current crisis has led to a brain drain, a fourfold depreciation in the currency's value, and widespread shortages of food and medicine. Hospitals are turning away patients due to a lack of essential supplies, and many children are attending school without proper nourishment, clothing, or stationery, as parents struggle to meet basic needs (CBCSL, 2023, p. 1).

At this critical juncture, when Sri Lanka's economy has reached its lowest point, it is essential to ask why this crisis has occurred and what steps can be taken to rebuild the nation. John Paul II's social thought, particularly his emphasis on the "equitable, just, and peaceful organization of society on a global as well as local level" (Han, 2005, p. 21), offers valuable guidance. His concept of solidarity, as articulated in the social encyclical *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis* (1987), can provide a roadmap for navigating toward peace and prosperity. John Paul II proposes the virtue of solidarity as an antidote to the "structures of sin" that perpetuate discrimination, marginalization, and polarization in society. Hence, this paper aims to contextualize John Paul II's vision of solidarity in Sri Lanka, exploring ways to promote peace and authentic development by healing the wounds of division and discrimination.

## 1.1 Objectives

- 1.1.1 To analyse the historical and contemporary challenges facing Sri Lanka particularly in the post war context and the current economic crisis
- 1.1.2 To explore John Paul II's concepts of the "structures of sin" and solidarity, and their relevance in addressing the ethnic, political, and social crises in Sri Lanka
- 1.1.3 To propose some ways and means by applying John Paul II's vision of solidarity in the Sri Lanka context to foster ethnic reconciliation, economic justice and peace.

## 1.2 Hypothesis

- 1.2.1 The application of John Paul II's vision of solidarity can foster ethnic reconciliation, reduce social polarization, and promote economic justice in post-war Sri Lanka.
- 1.2.2 Addressing the "structures of sin" as identified by John Paul II will lead to more effective solutions to Sri Lanka's current economic and social crises by promoting sustainable peace and authentic development.

## 1.3 Methodology/ Materials and Methods

This paper employs a qualitative approach, drawing insights from both primary and secondary sources. The primary sources consist of the encyclicals of John Paul II, with a particular focus on his social encyclical *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis*. The secondary sources include scholarly books and articles on the social and political crisis in Sri Lanka, as well as ecclesiastical documents, such as statements issued by the Bishops' Conference of Sri Lanka.

A historical analysis is conducted to trace the evolution of the ethnic conflict and the political and economic crises in Sri Lanka. In addition, a theological and ethical analysis is undertaken to contextualize John Paul II's social thought on solidarity within the Sri Lankan context. The study aims to draw conclusions that can guide efforts to navigate the current crisis, with a focus on achieving peace and promoting human flourishing.

## 2. Results and discussion

### 2.1 Understanding John Paul II's concept of Solidarity

John Paul II develops his concept of solidarity primarily in his social encyclical *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis*. He introduces solidarity within the framework of "the structures of sin," which permeate society and hinder the genuine development of individuals. These "structures of sin" perpetuate poverty, inequality, oppression, and discrimination based on religion, caste, and ethnicity, and are sustained by personal and collective selfishness, greed, and indifference. Mark Charlton observes that "human selfishness and short-sightedness become institutionalized within

social structures, magnifying and perpetuating the moral evil within the very structures of the international community" (Charlton, 2007, p. 212). John Paul II identifies these structures of sin as the root causes of inequality and injustice in society (Han, 2005, p. 21). In response, he advocates for moral conversion through solidarity, emphasizing the need for all people to recognize their shared humanity and take responsibility for one another. Since these structures lead to the discrimination and marginalization of people, John Paul II proposes solidarity as an antidote to these harmful social dynamics.

John Paul II published his seventh encyclical, *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis* (On Social Concern), on December 30, 1987, to explore the concept of authentic development, identify its obstacles, and suggest ways to promote human flourishing. In this encyclical, he aims to "name the obstacles to development, point out the false meaning of development, articulate a vision of authentic development, and lay down some guidelines for implementing the vision" (Curran, 2005, p. 415). Solidarity fosters an understanding of interdependence among individuals, motivating them to work towards the common good. B.H. Andolsen points out that "solidarity entails not just a recognition of human interdependence but also a moral commitment to act to minimize harm and to promote well-being throughout networks of natural human relationships" (Andolsen, 1998, p. 81). The virtue of solidarity cultivates a profound awareness of the interconnectedness of all individuals, encourages efforts towards the common good, and enables one to see others as inherently valuable. John Paul II asserts that solidarity empowers individuals to view the "other," whether a person, people, or nation, as a neighbor and partner rather than as a mere instrument to exploit and discard (SRS 39). This ethical perspective transforms relationships within communities, shifting from exploitation, discrimination, and marginalization to inclusion, while fostering shared responsibility for the well-being of others. In this context, B.H. Andolsen emphasizes that "solidarity is an important moral response to the social reality that human beings are increasingly socially and economically interdependent across the globe" (Andolsen, 1998, p. 82). John Paul II captures the essence of solidarity in the following words:

"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" (SRS, 38).

According to John Paul II, "Solidarity helps us to see the 'other'—whether a person, people, or nation—not just as some kind of instrument... but as our 'neighbor,' a 'helper' (cf. Gen 2:18-20), to be made a sharer, on par with ourselves, in the banquet of life to which all are equally invited by God" (SRS 39). Thus, he brings out the deep moral and theological dimension of solidarity, which calls everyone to recognize others as equal participants in the community. It also underscores the relational and interdependent nature of human beings, who possess inherent dignity. John Paul II insists that all are invited to partake in the "banquet of life," meaning everyone should have access to resources, opportunities, and rights without exclusion. In essence, solidarity signifies the recognition of the common humanity and equal worth of all individuals. John Paul II emphasizes that solidarity is "the path to peace and, at the same time, to development" (SRS 39.8). While Paul VI identified "development as the new name for peace," John Paul II argues that the virtue of solidarity is essential for achieving peace. This underscores that unity and shared responsibility are prerequisites for both national and global peace, requiring solidarity at all levels.

Furthermore, solidarity encompasses the concept of an "option for the poor" through Christian charity. Since poverty exists at both national and global levels, addressing it requires action on both fronts. John Paul II advocates for the "option or love of preference for the poor" as a fundamental societal principle (SRS 42.2). He calls on all people, particularly political and economic leaders, to prioritize the stark reality of poverty in their decision-making processes. He introduces the concept of a "social mortgage," which emphasizes the universal destination of goods, asserting that the world's resources belong to everyone (SRS 42.5). In contrast to poverty, John Paul II also discusses "superdevelopment," which arises from the "accumulation of goods and services" (SRS 28.1). He warns that this view of development, which focuses solely on economic growth, results in "superdevelopment," where certain groups benefit from excessive material wealth (SRS 28.2). Underlying this concept is a flawed understanding of development that prioritizes economic aspects over other dimensions of human life. Hence, John Paul II poses an important question: has such progress made humanity "more mature spiritually, more aware of the dignity of its humanity, more responsible, more open to others, especially the neediest and the weakest, and ready to give and aid all?" (SRS 15.4). He distinguishes between 'having' material possessions and 'being' a human being, emphasizing that a person's worth lies in their humanity, not their possessions—an important aspect of his anthropology.

## 2.2 The Sri Lankan Context: "The structures of Sins"

Gregory Baum identifies two types of colonialism that have oppressed people in Latin America: "external colonialism," which positions Latin America on the periphery of the global capitalist system, and "internal colonialism," characterised by extreme inequality between social classes, particularly in countries marked by "bi-classism"—a small, wealthy elite marginalising large segments of the population (Baum, 1987, p. 11). Sri Lanka, too, has experienced both forms of colonialism: external colonialism under successive colonial powers imposing external control and internal colonialism since independence, leading to deep internal divisions and discrimination. More than the effects of external colonialism, dismantling the harmful structures created by internal colonialism since independence is critical to fostering unity and development in the country

John Paul II's humanism, shaped by his experiences under two totalitarian regimes, namely Nazism and Soviet communism, offers a framework for addressing Sri Lanka's ethnic and religious tensions, inequality, and corruption. His focus on human dignity, solidarity, and rejection of unjust structures is relevant to Sri Lanka's context, where systemic discrimination and internal divisions persist. In *Sollicitudo rei Socialis*, John Paul II attributes underdevelopment in third-world countries to "structures of sin" that perpetuate social inequality, rooted in personal actions that solidify unjust systems (SRS 36). This applies to Sri Lanka, where entrenched discriminatory policies have fuelled economic disparity, ethnic tensions, and deep mistrust between communities.

Sri Lanka has faced both external and internal colonialism. The latter, characterized by social inequalities and divisions since independence, must be dismantled to foster national unity and development. Ethnic discrimination in language, education, and resource distribution has led to systemic injustices, leaving many marginalized and exacerbating poverty. The corrupt practices and nepotism in politics, especially under the Rajapaksa administration, have worsened the economic crisis by prioritizing power over democratic principles and development. Furthermore, misguided economic policies, including high-interest loans from China, have resulted in unsustainable debt and loss of strategic national assets like the Hambantota Port. Discriminatory

laws, especially against the Tamil minority, have further entrenched social and economic inequalities.

The Catholic Bishops' Conference of Sri Lanka (CBCSL) warned in 1984 that unresolved internal conflicts could lead to foreign intervention, a reality now evident with the International Monetary Fund's involvement. Shanthi Mendis identifies "populist policies and misplaced nationalism" as drivers of Sri Lanka's current crisis (Mendis, 2022, p. ix). She calls for an end to short-term political strategies, advocating for sustainable policies, economic reforms, and national unity to overcome the entrenched "structures of evil and injustice" in the country. Addressing these "structures of sin" is essential for promoting peace, justice, and prosperity in Sri Lanka.

### 3. The need for the virtue of solidarity in Sri Lanka

John Paul II's concept of solidarity addresses structures that divide and marginalize, playing a crucial role in rectifying injustices and fostering unity in Sri Lanka. Since independence, government policies have marginalized ethnic and religious minorities, reinforced divisions and contributing to a prolonged ethnic crisis. The challenge is not just to address symptoms like poverty and discrimination but to dismantle these structures and build a just society. The Church has a critical responsibility to dismantle sinful structures and build equitable societies. Solidarity is essential for uniting people as brothers and sisters. John Paul II calls it a moral imperative demanding active participation in the struggles of the marginalized, recognizing shared humanity as crucial for achieving the common good. In Sri Lanka, where minorities face systematic exclusion, solidarity requires the Church to advocate for justice and equality, embracing a prophetic role to challenge discrimination and build an inclusive society. The Catholic Bishops' Conference of Sri Lanka (CBCSL) highlights the need for collective action: "we are called upon to join hands with all our fellow citizens and the best of what their own religious and cultural traditions can offer" (CBCSL, 2013, p. 4). This mission requires unity, cooperation, and interfaith dialogue. John Paul II's *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis* calls for a "conversion towards solidarity and an option for the poor" to overcome societal sin (Deberri, 2005, p. 88).

Solidarity urges recognition of universal human dignity, calling individuals to see each other as brothers and sisters beyond ethnic differences. This moral conversion demands a radical change from both majority and minority populations in Sri Lanka. Solidarity, described as "a moral and social attitude," acknowledges humanity's interconnectedness. It is not "a feeling of vague compassion" (SRS 38.6) but a commitment to promoting social justice. In Sri Lanka, fostering a sense of interconnectedness between communities is essential for forming a united nation. Solidarity highlights interdependence between majority and minority groups, guiding the creation of frameworks that prioritize the common good. John Paul II asserts that solidarity means "a firm and persevering determination to commit oneself to the common good" (SRS 38.6). It requires action to ensure the well-being of all, especially the marginalized. He stresses the importance of recognizing "one another as persons" (SRS 39.1), foundational for building a just society. Solidarity challenges societies to see the "other" as "our 'neighbour,' a 'helper'... to be made a sharer... in the banquet of life" (SRS 39.5). This teaching invites Sri Lanka to embrace solidarity, valuing every individual and moving toward peace and reconciliation

### 3 Solidarity: The Need for Inclusivity in Language

The "Sinhala Only Act" of 1956, which revoked Tamil's equal status, is a key example of Sri Lanka's structures of sin. This act used language to undermine ethnic harmony, as noted by the

Catholic Bishops' Conference of Sri Lanka: "the preference accorded to the Sinhala language and culture over those of other minorities severely strained national unity" (CBCSL, 2012, p. 5). It led to discrimination and marginalization of minorities, violating justice and equality.

Once Sinhala became the official language, interest in learning Tamil or English declined, disrupting ethnic harmony. Dr. Colvin R. de Silva warned, "Two languages, one nation; one language, two nations" (CBCSL, 2013, p. 5). Language became a tool for division rather than a bridge. To foster unity, Sri Lanka should promote multilingualism and respect for all languages. Ethnic tensions in Sri Lanka have caused deep divisions, making it essential for all citizens to foster a shared humanity and overcome past marginalization. Since language was a significant factor in the origins of the ethnic conflict, fostering linguistic inclusivity in Sri Lanka is essential. Promoting trilingualism (Sinhala, Tamil, and English), as recommended by the Catholic Bishops' Conference of Sri Lanka (CBCSL), is key to bridging communication gaps and fostering unity. The "Sinhala Only Act" previously fuelled ethnic conflict, and introducing trilingualism can enhance mutual understanding and social cohesion, while expanding economic and governance opportunities. Trilingual capability, combined with equal employment opportunities, can help break down barriers. The CBCSL suggests requiring trilingual skills for university graduation and certain jobs: "We firmly believe that conferring university degrees on graduates should require trilingual capability. Additionally, it is necessary to strengthen the provisions of the National Language Act..." (CBCSL, 2013, p. 7). Implementing these reforms will promote linguistic harmony and inclusivity.

### 3.1 Solidarity as Key to Peace in Post-War Sri Lanka

Following the end of Sri Lanka's ethnic war in 2009, there is a strong desire for peace. John Paul II emphasized solidarity's role in achieving peace, stating, "Opus solidaritatis pax, peace as the fruit of solidarity" (SRS 39). He highlighted that while justice is essential for peace, as noted by Pope Pius XII's motto "Opus iustitiae pax," solidarity is equally crucial, particularly in conflict situations like Sri Lanka. Amid Sri Lanka's economic crisis, the CBCSL urged unity: "We must unite or perish together" (CBCSL, 2022, p. 3). This message emphasizes solidarity's role in addressing ongoing challenges, echoing John Paul II's teachings on the interconnectedness of all people. The current crisis shows that all Sri Lankans suffer from discriminatory policies, highlighting the urgent need for solidarity to address longstanding inequalities. Solidarity fosters mutual respect and cooperation, helping to overcome divisions and build a more inclusive society. John Paul II's teachings, based on Isaiah 32:17 and James 3:18, emphasize that solidarity, linked to human dignity and the common good, is essential for true peace. In Sri Lanka's context, where ethnic conflict led to discrimination and marginalization, solidarity can bridge divides and promote coexistence. John Paul II urged seeing others as "equal partners...in the banquet of life" (SRS 39.5), a principle that can guide Sri Lanka towards dismantling exploitation and fostering unity. His concept of solidarity provides a moral foundation for peace and reconciliation in the country, addressing discrimination's role in the ethnic crisis.

### 3.2 Solidarity: the Need to Include the Poor

The thirty-year conflict in Sri Lanka left profound economic and social scars, culminating in the current crisis. Anuradi Perera notes, "the World Bank report confirms that areas most affected by conflict have the highest levels of poverty and the weakest equality of opportunity" (Perera, 2017), particularly in impoverished estate areas like Badulla and Nuwara Eliya. John Paul II emphasizes that overcoming such social injustices requires "solidarity" and "the option for the

poor" to foster a just and peaceful society (SRS 41.4). The Church offers moral guidance, focusing on social justice, rather than technical solutions. Shanthi Mendis attributes the economic crisis to poor governance and concentration of power under Gotabaya Rajapaksa's family, which led to corruption and mismanagement, driving the country to bankruptcy. She states, "the capture of major ministerial positions by members of a single family supported an authoritarian style of governance" (Mendis, 2022, p. 10).

Amidst this, Sri Lankans united under the "Gota go home" movement, a protest involving all social backgrounds. As Mendis notes, "Protestors were from all walks of life" (Mendis, 2022, p. 11), showing solidarity against an unjust regime. The peaceful "Aragalaya" movement demonstrated how solidarity can dismantle authoritarianism and push for social transformation. Daisy Machado stresses the role of empathy, "We are called to see ourselves in the faces of those who live on the margins" (Machado, 2006, p. 124), underscoring solidarity's power to unite people for justice and the common good.

### 3.3 Solidarity as Fostering Inclusivity in Sri Lanka

In Sri Lanka, inclusivity is vital for uniting a diverse society and addressing ethnic discrimination. Grounded in human dignity, it emphasizes respect for all, regardless of ethnicity, religion, gender, or social status. This principle, inspired by John Paul II's humanism, can help Sri Lanka heal past wounds and foster unity, justice, and equal citizenship. Inclusivity within solidarity ensures that all, including minorities, fully participate in society. It requires policies promoting equality, dialogue, and cooperation across ethnic and religious lines to build a unified society. The Catholic Bishops' Conference of Sri Lanka stressed the need for inclusivity to achieve peace in a multi-ethnic society (CBCSL, 1984).

In *Redemptor Hominis*, John Paul II highlights that the Incarnation elevates humanity, revealing its full potential in Jesus Christ. Jesus' mission was to end exclusion and promote inclusion, challenging norms that marginalized people based on ethnicity, gender, and social status. His inclusive vision for the Kingdom of God dismantled divisive barriers. Albert Nolan contrasts the "kingdom" of Satan, based on exclusive group solidarity, with God's kingdom, founded on universal solidarity (Nolan, 2015, p. 97). In Sri Lanka, ethnic nationalism has led to exclusionary practices. The Church must advocate for social justice through inclusive policies, ensuring the marginalized are integral parts of society. The World Bank identifies four dimensions of inclusion in Sri Lanka: space, ethnicity, gender, and youth. Addressing disparities in resource distribution, ethnic integration, gender equality, and youth participation is essential for unity and prosperity. Sri Lanka must embrace inclusivity in line with Jesus' example, recognizing the worth of every individual and ensuring their full participation in society.

### 3.4 The Formation of Basic Human Communities

Solidarity provides a framework for addressing Sri Lanka's social and political challenges and promoting peace. Forming grassroots communities with diverse ethnic and religious members embodies solidarity, addressing poverty, education, and fostering dialogue and mutual support. The Church can play a vital role by organizing interfaith communities to overcome mistrust and division. The Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences (FABC) supports Basic Human Communities (BHCs) for social justice and solidarity in a multi-religious context. BHCs help bridge gaps between ethnic and religious groups, heal past wounds, and address inequalities. They can also raise political awareness, advocate for equitable resource distribution, and empower

marginalized groups. Pope Francis' call for a synodal church emphasizes the importance of communities as spaces for communion. These basic human communities can serve as spaces for interreligious dialogue, as they are composed of individuals from different religions, ethnicities, and cultures living in the neighbourhood. J. M. Jeyaseelan points out that “collaboration among religions is a good way to seek peace and reconciliation in Sri Lanka” (Jeyaseelan, 2018, p. 202). John Paul II's humanism, centered on dignity, solidarity, and dialogue, offers a theological framework for peace and justice in Sri Lanka. The Church, despite being a minority, must dismantle discriminatory structures and promote human flourishing through solidarity and BHCs.

## Conclusion

Sri Lanka's journey towards peace, justice, and authentic development requires a transformative embrace of solidarity. Drawing on John Paul II's social teachings, especially his call to dismantle "structures of sin," this article has highlighted the need to address systemic discrimination, economic disparity, and political injustice. The formation of grassroots communities, fostering interethnic and interfaith dialogue, and promoting inclusivity across all sectors—language, education, and governance—are crucial steps towards healing the nation's deep divisions.

Solidarity, as a moral and social commitment, provides a path to overcoming past wounds and achieving national unity. By recognizing the inherent dignity of every individual and striving for a society where all participate equally, Sri Lanka can build a more inclusive future. The Church's role in advocating for social justice, facilitating dialogue, and empowering marginalized groups remains vital in this process. To move forward, Sri Lanka must prioritize solidarity, inclusivity, and shared responsibility to foster a society rooted in peace and human flourishing.

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