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## SOLIDARITY WITH "A WORD OF SOLIDARITY"

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Without question, this is a remarkable document. In fact it has implications and ramifications that reach far beyond Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union, although that is its first intent. Let us draw attention to some of its most powerful features and then indicate how widely they reach:

Many Christian groups have, over the past several hundred years, spoken of human rights. Indeed, the evidence is rather convincing that the roots of human rights thinking comes not from some secular or philosophical conception of humanity but from a theological perspective that understood that humans were made in the image of God and thus were to be treated as having a conferred dignity that transcended their social, political, economic, or bio-physical worth, or their moral and intellectual attainments.

This essential human quality, the most profound aspect of what it means to be human, demands that we see humans as relational beings. We are first of all to live in relationship to the God who created us, cares for us, and redeems us from all our inadequacies, rebellions, and sins; and we are to live in relationship to fellow humans. This relationship to our fellows is not to be one of mutual exploitation or of coerced solidarity any more than it is solidarity that can be confined to any racial, ethnic, national, class, caste, or sexual group. Instead, it is a relationship rooted in covenantal love--that is, in a voluntary, caring, just mutuality under a universal moral law--that becomes concrete in specific religious communities and, in principle, reaches to embrace all of humanity. Such an idea has at least five implications of great importance.

The first implication of this idea is that Christians know something that is universally valid about human nature and can, and should, teach the world that truth that it knows. Other religions and philosophies may contribute much to human understanding and life; but this is one of Christianity's great gifts to the world. Indeed, the evidence is quite strong that the Christian faith has, slowly and painfully, and with many blemishes in its own history, taught the world what is most universally true and just about humanity.

Part of what is remarkable about this claim is that theology may well, in this area of human existence, be the most universal mode of discourse. In some aspects of life and thought, of course, we may want to speak of some natural or social science or of great art;

but when it comes to the nature of human nature, so decisive for the fundamental organization of human civilizations, the Christian faith has unveiled what is more true than all psychologies and sociologies and literatures and poetries have been able to articulate.

Theology, to put it another way, is potentially a public mode of discourse, one that cannot only shape the common life, but can reach beyond the limitations of political system, or historical culture, or social ideology to embrace that which is valid for all humans at the most significant levels. Insofar as this is so, it is both proper and necessary for religious organizations educated to such a theology to be able to articulate and exemplify this concern for human rights publicly instruct both the leaders of civilizations, and to teach the people their rights on a cross-cultural basis.

We are, on this point, not confined to our own socio-cultural conditioning, but can point to some basic ethical matters, to which all cultures and societies ought to be judged, that transcend any particular context.

A second implication of this statement is in regard to the primary focus of this publication: relationships between East and West. It has often been argued that the conceptions of human rights that dominates in the East, are those having to do with social and economic rights while those in the west have to do with civil and political rights. The former, it is said, focus most on the community while the latter focus most on the individual. This stereotype is, of course, only partly true; but there is enough to it that a rather extensive library of polemics have tried to make it appear that way.

In any case, what we have in this document, based neither on "Western bourgeois individualism" nor "Eastern atheistic communism" is a conception of "persons in communities of commitment" that allow freedom for individuals to be responsible in noncollectivistic community (such as parent's duty to train their children), ecclesial or institutional freedom that demands a real pluralism of community formation in the common life without coercive interference (and thus the individual can chose to participate or not), and "freedom of association--the formation of communities enabled to address issues of the common life ("educational, cultural, charitable, or social").

This is all the more remarkable because this comes at a time in the development of Eastern Europe when glasnost and perestroika are bringing a new range of possibilities for democracy in the East, and the West is able to overcome its fear of and hostility toward messianic revolutionism and state-dominated authoritarianism. On what model shall we base our mutual respect, if not on a common regard for human rights; and on what basis shall we reconstruct our inner lives of community reconstruction that is just and compassionate, if we cannot have the "social space" for persons working together in voluntary communities of commitment under a moral and spiritual sense of deep and wide responsibility?

A third area for which this document has large implication is in regard to North South relationships. It is not, of course, a document written with that explicitly in mind, but it is very clear that "the lack of religious liberty is one index of poverty and underdevelopment." The denial or limitation of religious liberty, the document correctly suggests, is intimately tied to denial of "right to share in the building of society, the freedom to organize and to form unions or to take initiatives in economic matters."

It has not always been the witness of the Roman Catholic Church in parts of the southern hemisphere, or in all moments of its European history, to recognize this fact. Indeed, there are some recent stances taken by the Church against advocates of the base communities in Latin America that functionally, if unintentionally, ignore this teaching. But it does seem that the experience of key area of the Northern Hemisphere which these Bishops know best, and increasing evidence from those areas of Asia where development is bringing new prospects of democracy and relief of need, are those areas where freedom of religion is most widely practiced. And it seems that this is related specifically to the efforts to "take initiatives in economic matters," and not to passively depend on state initiative.

A fourth area of implication is in regard to ecumenical relationships. The document makes clear that it is not arguing for the privilege of the Roman Catholic Church alone. Nor is it only concerned with Christians in the great established traditions of Orthodoxy and Protestantism. It is also claiming freedom for sectarian groups who are in the Christian tradition but who oppose nearly everything the Roman Catholic Church stands for (some Baptist groups and the Jehovah's Witnesses, for example) and even more for Jews, Muslims, and Buddhists.

This means that Protestants who have, for centuries, struggled to establish a separation of church and state in opposition to Catholic efforts to maintain establishment are now the allies of the Roman Catholic Church, and less its enemies. Similarly, the document implies that Christians can recognize the integrity of believers in other faiths, and their right to be pursued, even if we believe that those faiths are, in some respect or other, finally inadequate to the full understanding of the nature of the divine. The whole basis of religious participation is, here, put on the basis of choice and persuasion, and not on the basis of any religious or anti-religious group's enlistment of the state to control belief.

And finally, this document implies that the prevailing understanding of past and future, in both East and West (and even in parts of modern religious communities), are mistaken. Many have held that the course of history is from religious and "mythological" past to secular and "scientific" future, one in which the church would fade away. In fact, it seems that in documents such as these, that the church is setting forth teachings that are indispensable for the salvation of societies and for the salvation of humans--salvation not only in the ultimate and spiritual senses; but in the quite concrete sense of what is indispensable to keep us from

blowing ourselves up, from murdering our neighbors, and forming empires that fall of their own unwieldy weight.

Because of the inherent truth and justice of this message, because of the cross-cultural awareness that it brings, and because of its multiple implications, I, as a Free-Church Protestant want to express my solidarity with this document. I think that most of Ecumenical, Evangelical, and Liberal Protestantism would, on reflection, also.