New Visions of Community
Emmanuel Katongole

Another Life Is Possible
Clare Stober

Chaim Potok’s Believers
Wesley Hill

SOLIDARITY
BREAKING GROUND FOR A RENEWED WORLD

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Dear Reader,

Pandemics, whatever else they do, show us we are not alone. “No man is an island,” runs the much-quoted John Donne line, and that never seems truer than when you’re trying to be an island and failing: not keeping six feet of distance when meeting a friend, fighting to get the kids to keep their masks on, simmering with resentment that you can’t get to a Mets game.

Covid-19 is proof that, yes, there is such a thing as society; the disease has spread precisely because we aren’t autonomous individuals disconnected from each other, but rather all belong to one great body of humanity. The pain inflicted by the pandemic is far from equally distributed. Yet it reveals ever more clearly how much we all depend on one another, and how urgently necessary it is for us to bear one another’s burdens. Faced with the dilemma of how to resume social interactions safely, we’ve learned how badly we miss each other. In a way unimaginable a year ago, seven billion people’s joys and tears – at least in regard to the spread of the virus while we await a vaccine – are our own.

It’s a good time, then, to talk about solidarity. The more so because it’s a theme that’s also raised by this year’s other major development, the international protests for racial justice following George Floyd’s death. It was astonishing to watch crowds chanting “Black Lives Matter” in cities as far removed from US policing as Stockholm, Seville, and Sydney. Here was solidarity, or at least a craving for something resembling it.

The protests, too, raised the question of solidarity in guilt, even guilt across generations. One demand voiced by many protesters was for reparations: that the descendants of slavery’s perpetrators and beneficiaries pay back a debt to the descendants of the enslaved. How this would work in practice is far from clear, yet even critics of the idea will agree that in principle, reparations can be a just response to historical wrongs. Millions of Germans born after 1945 continue to pay reparations through their tax money to the descendants of those their great-grandparents killed. Truth and reconciliation initiatives in South Africa and elsewhere have sought to provide a kind of intergenerational justice. And in the United States, this year the Supreme Court reached back to an 1833 treaty to recognize half of Oklahoma as Native tribal land, in a ruling referencing the country’s appalling atrocities against Native Americans. In varying ways, each of these examples involves a claim about inherited responsibility – and perhaps inherited guilt.

Built into these claims is a logic at which the liberal mind angrily recoils. Schooled to think only in terms of individual rights and responsibilities, it asks: How can I be held responsible for evils over which I have no control?

“Everyone is really responsible to everyone for everything.”

Fyodor Dostoyevsky
Many Christians might be inclined to agree with the objection. But the Christian tradition says: not so fast. In fact, Christianity takes solidarity in guilt, even inherited guilt, with utmost seriousness. According to the apostle Paul, all humankind sinned and was condemned in the sin of our forefather Adam: “For as in Adam all die . . .” (1 Cor. 15). Whether one speaks of “original sin” with Augustine, “federal headship” with the Reformers, or “total Adam” with Orthodox thinkers, this is not a theme Christians are free to casually dismiss.

The most vivid exploration of this kind of solidarity is Fyodor Dostoyevsky’s novel *The Brothers Karamazov*. Dostoyevsky has one character, a dying teenager, tell his mother: “Every one of us has sinned against all men. . . . Everyone is really responsible to all men for all men and for everything.”

Responsibility for all and to all: on its face, this seems nonsensical. Its logic tars each of us with the guilt not only of those whom we know and might theoretically influence, but also with the sins of people we’ll never meet and of people long dead. (A cynic might add that responsibility for everything amounts, in the real world, to responsibility for nothing.)

Yet Dostoyevsky’s words aren’t just the ruminations of an eccentric novelist. They are repeated almost verbatim in one of the towering statements of modern Christian social teaching, Pope John Paul II’s 1987 encyclical *Sollicitudo rei socialis* (see page 56). Solidarity, the pope writes, “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.”

This true solidarity is the opposite of the false solidarities of today’s identity politics on both the right and the left. Whether simply racist or purportedly antiracist, such false solidarities regard people primarily as bearers of one or more group identities based on nationality, race, class, or gender – and view these identity groups as inevitably antagonistic, locked with other groups in a bitter struggle for power. Here, “justice” means little more than a tense balancing of group interests. As a result, those who embrace such a worldview are liable to make recourse to coercion and even violence, as ugly episodes at some of the protests this past summer illustrate.

By contrast, Christianity – with Judaism and other faiths – teaches that people are first and foremost bearers of the divine image. Each of us shares with all others the fundamental bond of our common humanity. Because of this, the gospel utterly condemns the oppression of one group by another, including the entire demonic edifice of white supremacy (see page 30). But for the same reason, it refuses to fight fire with fire, combating group self-interest with group self-interest. Instead, it offers the way of solidarity in guilt of which John Paul II and Dostoyevsky speak.
This way is no grim invitation to endless self-abasing struggle sessions. (In this, it couldn't differ more from the racial essentialism of best-sellers such as Robin DiAngelo’s *White Fragility.*) Instead, it is a doorway to rediscovering the glorious calling we share with all human beings.

By taking up our common guilt with all humanity, we come into solidarity with the one who bears it and redeems it all. “For as in Adam all die,” Paul continues, “even so in Christ shall all be made alive.” In Christ, sins are forgiven, guilt abolished, and a new way of living together becomes possible.

This solidarity in forgiveness—the solidarity that Christ has taken up with us—gives rise to a life of love. It’s the reason why another character in *The Brothers Karamazov* could say: “As for each man being guilty before all and for all, besides his own sins . . . when people understand this thought, the kingdom of heaven will come to them, no longer a dream but in reality.”

**One hundred years ago** this year, in a Germany shattered by war and revolution, a discussion group met each Thursday evening in a townhouse in Berlin to imagine a new way to live, one shaped by this kind of solidarity. As Antje Vollmer describes (page 98), the young participants were a diverse bunch: evangelicals and anarchists, military officers and pacifists, artists and Quakers. In a country ruined by nationalism, militarism, and exploitation, Dostoyevsky’s words about responsibility for all and to all struck them with enormous force. Especially, they read Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount. There, they found a God who invites us to a practical, creative way of life in which our solidarity in guilt is transformed into a new kind of togetherness as we work side by side to build the new social order the Gospels describe.

At the end of one of their gatherings in the spring of 1920, a young woman stood up and announced: “We have talked enough. Now it is time for deeds.” Eberhard and Emmy Arnold, the couple hosting the evenings, took her words to heart. He resigned his job at a Christian publishing house and sold his life insurance policy; Emmy brought their five children to a dilapidated villa in the backwater village of Sannerz. Together with Emmy’s sister Else von Hollander, they founded a communal settlement inspired by the example of the first Christians, and with friends started a new publishing house with the name *Neuwerk*: the New Work. Over the following decades, the publishing house would take the English name Plough, and the communal settlement would become the Bruderhof, the community that publishes this magazine (see page 102).

In the same spirit as the Berlin discussion group a century ago, this issue of *Plough* seeks to explore what solidarity means, and what it looks like to live it out today, whether in Uganda, Bolivia, or South Korea, in an urban church, a Bruderhof, or a convent. We look forward to hearing what you think.

Warm greetings,

Peter Mommsen, Editor
Deep Solidarity

An Interview with Emmanuel Katongole
Jake Meador: Let’s get right into a topic you’ve written about recently: why violence and corruption continue to plague so many countries in Africa. In your book *The Sacrifice of Africa*, you argue that the reason for this is not the failure of the nation-state in Africa, as many assume, but rather its success. Could you explain?

Emmanuel Katongole: I wrote the book in part in response to the endless cycles of poverty, violence, and corruption in many parts of Africa, including my own country, Uganda. You often hear about the dysfunctional nature of politics in Africa; you hear about different techniques to help the nation-state become more rational, more transparent, more effective.

But all these proposals assume that African nation-states are the way they are – often with disorder, violence, and poverty – because they’re still at an early stage of history. We will, the story goes, eventually progress to a more rationalized, bureaucratized system, able to effectively deliver services and promote the common good. But that is misleading. In order to understand why, one has to do a little bit of archaeology, so to speak: one must dig into the foundational assumptions of the African nation-state, of when, how, and why it came into existence. That is what I try to do in *The Sacrifice of Africa*, which led me to see that the

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**Father Emmanuel Katongole**, PhD, is a core faculty member of the Kroc Institute for International Peace Studies at the University of Notre Dame. He was earlier the founding co-director of the Center for Reconciliation at Duke Divinity School. His most recent book is Born from Lament: On the Theology and Politics of Hope in Africa (Eerdmans, 2017), and he has just completed another manuscript on issues of identity and violence called Who Are My People?

**Jake Meador** is editor-in-chief of the Mere Orthodoxy blog.

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African nation-state is a successor institution to the colonial regime. The latter was set up to benefit, not the colonized peoples of Africa, but rather the colonial centers. Accordingly, whatever “development” was set in place simply represented the minimum required to maintain the colonial system of control and extraction.

At independence, when power was finally wrested out of the hands of the colonial regimes, the African elites became the de facto rulers. Yet the institutions they inherited continued to work out of the same imagination of control and extraction. They continued not only to depend on the colonial centers in systems of commerce, but also to serve elite interests. This is what I refer to as “King Leopold’s ghost.”

So when people say “Africa is dysfunctional,” I reply, no, it’s not. Given the foundational assumptions—that is, the nation-state—politics in Africa actually works as intended.

**Meador:** It’s done what it’s designed to do.

**Katongole:** Exactly. That is why what is needed is not just recommendations to help democracy flourish or to make the nation-state work better. We need to reimagine politics from a new point of view.

**Meador:** Your discussion of the Nigerian writer Chinua Achebe’s novel *Things Fall Apart* gets at the need to imagine a new political narrative rather than making a nostalgic appeal to something that came before. Can you talk about that?

**Katongole:** There’s a temptation to think, “If only we can recover the precolonial traditions and build from those.” Well, yes, this might be helpful. But we must be thoughtful. It is not as if precolonial traditions are standing around waiting to be recovered. Even if this were the case, there are a number of aspects of precolonial African history and society that I’m not sure I want recovered.

*Things Fall Apart* was crucial to me in thinking this through. There’s violence in the protagonist Okonkwo’s village before the coming of the colonialists; many are killed, women are abused. This is not a perfect society. The book contains a scene in which Okonkwo and the village’s traditional leaders confront the colonialists, and Okonkwo kills one of the Europeans. I read this scene as showing two different forms of violence meeting in the marketplace. In a way, it is a picture of what is happening in Africa now. Some precolonial forms of violence come together with new forms of violence, issuing in what I call a unique form of African modernity.

My interest is, how do we move through this? Simply recovering or recreating the past is not the way history works.

Christianity, I think, might provide a way forward. Well, of course I think that— I’m a Christian! But I’m also committed to nonviolence, to the vision of true peace at the heart of the Christian story. If we were to live into that, it might provide us with a way of working
AN INTERVIEW WITH JACQUELINE AND EUGENE RIVERS

BLACK LIVES MATTER and the Church
Plough: You both have been working for decades as Christian leaders in the Dorchester neighborhood in Boston. What have been your thoughts in the weeks since George Floyd’s killing on May 25, 2020?

Jacqueline Rivers: Mostly, I’ve been thinking about what the response of the church should be; it’s been heavy on my heart because the church has not played a clear role. It seems as though the protesting young people, many of whom are not people of faith at all, are coming out in hundreds of thousands, because we, the church, haven’t done enough to advance racial justice and so God has placed this responsibility on the shoulders of nonbelievers.

Eugene Rivers: It’s important for the church to think more creatively, and to pay much more attention to history. I’m old enough to have seen the riots the night Martin Luther King was assassinated, April 4th, 1968. The rage young people felt then had been growing, as the theater of struggle shifted beyond the deep South to cities like Los Angeles, where the first major riots happened. Today’s movement has been building since the death of Trayvon Martin. Right before George Floyd, we had the deaths of Ahmaud Arbery and Breonna Taylor. And the church, black and white, did not see deeply enough into the nature of the crisis. We have to look in the mirror and ask, “Where were we? How were so many nonbelievers able to exhibit this level of black–white solidarity?”

Jacqueline C. Rivers is the executive director of the Seymour Institute for Black Church and Policy Studies and a lecturer at Harvard University.

Eugene F. Rivers III is the founder and director of the Seymour Institute for Black Church and Policy Studies.
James Gurney is a neighbor to the Bruderhof community in Platte Clove, New York. He’s also the beloved author and illustrator of the book Dinotopia and its sequels. For this issue, Plough editor Susannah Black asked him about his work and the world that he’s invented—a place where not only humans of many ethnicities and cultures work together in harmony, but even humans and dinosaurs live in solidarity.
Plough: The society you portray in your Dinotopia books has, obviously, captivated a huge audience. What about it do you think has been so compelling? What about that world, that alternate social reality, is compelling to you?

James Gurney: What people tell me most often is that they like the sense of immersion they feel when they read the book. Some of that comes from its being an illustrated book, which sketches out so many dimensions of an alternate universe. The reader’s imagination adds at least 50 percent to that act of conjuring, filling in the spaces between the pictures and the words. What I find compelling is trying to make the impossible seem inevitable, whether it’s a city built on a waterfall or a dinosaur philosopher.

One striking thing about the world you create is its relationship to technology. It is in no sense a primitive society: they have diving machines, hot air balloons, etc. But they also seem to be selective in what they adopt and are drawn to. What is the nature of the Dinotopian approach to appropriate technology?

As the son, grandson, and great-grandson of tinkerers, engineers, and inventors, I’ve always been fascinated by technology. In particular, I’m interested in how every obvious benefit of a new technological invention is counterbalanced by an invisible cost or compromise that may take a generation or two to recognize. There are so many examples. Even the invention of writing undercut the “palaces of memory” that preliterate societies once had. If there was a period when we might have really taken stock and considered the future more judiciously, it would have been at the advent of electricity, mass production, automobiles, airplanes, and modern communications: in other words, about one hundred and fifty years ago. It’s still recent enough and familiar enough to relate to, but it puts our modern dilemmas in some context. We’re at a similar crossroads now with the advent of robotics and AI, and I think living intentionally with technology will become even more important.

I created the prequel Dinotopia: First Flight to explore those questions from a dystopian point of view. I love the idea of a utopian world that arrived at that place after having survived earlier times of struggle and suffering.

In a similar way, Dinotopia is an urban world, but has many characteristics that I associate with the rural: integration, beauty, balance.
Tell me about how you’ve chosen to portray cities in these books.

I think those qualities of integration, beauty, and balance can exist in urban worlds as well as rural ones, especially if you start by doing away with cars. I tried to include in Dinotopia everything from crowded urban life to small towns to remote and wild environments. The design of the cities is inspired by the medieval urban design of Old World cities, with their organic street grids and vernacular architecture, rather than the top-down design of more highly professionalized societies. I was also inspired by exposition architecture, such as the 1893 Chicago Exposition, which was a temporary expression of the highest ideals of the American Renaissance.

Tolkien described the imaginative work that artists, and particularly fantasy artists, do as “subcreation”: his idea was that we create because we are creatures of a creative God who has made us in his image. Does this idea have resonance with you?

I hadn’t read that idea about Tolkien. My understanding (and I may be wrong) was that he saw himself not so much as a creator or a subcreator but rather as a kind of lowly transcriber of some ancient text that already existed.

Thinking this way allows the author to take himself or herself out of the position of creator. That relieves one of the burden of playing God. If you believe your fantasy world already exists, it makes the ideas come more readily to the imagination.

The sense that one gets about the world that you’ve made is that you love it: you don’t just love the characters, but the place itself. Can you talk about that love? What is it like to love something you’ve made?

Yes, I love the characters with all their flaws and I love the place with all its history. I once printed some travel tickets to Dinotopia that I give to people. The only problem, I tell them, is that they’re one-way tickets. My publishing mentor Ian Ballantine, who published Tolkien and a lot of imaginative fiction, was adamant that the purpose of fantasy literature is not to escape, but to engage. It’s fun to involve my imagination with a place that doesn’t exist, because it makes me appreciate our own world even more.

There is conflict in Dinotopia, but it is a utopia; it’s a place where harmony reigns. What is the nature of that harmony? What does the kind of interesting, non-passive, daring peace you’ve presented there mean to you?
Solidarity Means Giving Yourself

Can a cloistered nun help a hurting world?
Am feeling confused right now about what I want to give my neighbor.” A letter from a friend captured the feelings of many Americans this spring. This was back when “the Head Cheetah” — the only name I’ve heard her use for President Donald Trump that could also be called a term of endearment — sent out relief checks. My friend wanted to give hers away; her husband wanted to keep it against an uncertain future. Meanwhile, she worried that they were falling short in love of neighbor by “aggressive self-focus.”

“It’s funny I’m telling you this, of all people,” her letter concluded, “since I believe you’ve dropped out of society more than my husband has.”

I often hear comments like this about my cloistered life in a Dominican monastery. As a contemplative nun, my days are spent away from mainstream society — no commute, no trips to the grocery, no family vacations. And yet, hard as it is for some to understand, as a nun I do have a vocation to fulfill in solidarity with a hurting world.

In the tradition of Catholic social teaching, solidarity is a modern word but not a new concept. Building on the natural law tradition of great thinkers like Augustine and Aquinas, popes in the twentieth century spoke increasingly of the need for “friendship,” “social charity,” and a “civilization of love.” It was Pope Saint John Paul II, survivor of both Nazi terror and Communist oppression in his native Poland, who began preaching this doctrine with urgency for the new millennium.

“Solidarity,” he wrote in his 1987 encyclical, On Social Concern, “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.”

We are all really responsible for all. What does this mean?

In everyday speech, “solidarity” can stand for anything from friendly feelings to support for a favorite cause. Standing with and standing for, that’s solidarity, right?

Not exactly. As John Paul II points out, solidarity is not an emotion. Those experiences people have on social media — little bursts of righteous indignation, warm feelings of like-mindedness, the rewarding sense they’ve done their part by clicking “like” or “share” — nope, not solidarity.

Nor does solidarity mean championing just any cause. According to John Paul II’s definition, solidarity is a commitment to an objective standard called the common good. The common good isn’t the sum of individual interests, as though the greatest number of students getting their way were the greatest good for the classroom; it’s the ideal good for society as a whole, the sum total of social conditions allowing all people to reach fulfillment. Although it doesn’t bow to individual interests, the common good is thus very much concerned with the flourishing of individuals: “the good of all and of each.”

Sister Dominic Mary Heath, OP, is a Dominican nun at Our Lady of Grace Monastery, North Guilford, Connecticut.
One hundred years ago, as Germany reeled from World War I and the revolution that followed it, Plough’s founding editor Eberhard Arnold announced the launch of a new publishing house, then called Neuwerk, the “New Work” (see previous article). This mission statement, which still guides our work, appears here with an illustrated timeline to celebrate one century of publishing.

The Neuwerk publishing house is a communal publishing enterprise. It exists not for the profit of one or more entrepreneurs, but instead as a community of common purpose that manifests and pursues its shared spirit and goals through all forms of publishing. The publishing house takes its name from its biweekly magazine Das neue Werk: der Christ im Volksstaat (The New Work: The Christian in Democracy).

Eberhard Arnold (1883–1935) was a German theologian and cofounder of the Bruderhof.
The mission of the magazine shows the way forward for the mission of the publishing house as a whole. This mission is to proclaim living renewal, to summon people to the deeds of the spirit of Christ, to spread the mind that was in Jesus in the national and social distress of the present day, to apply Christianity publicly, to testify to God’s action in the history of our days. Though this task is not tied to a church, it is a religious task. It means penetrating down to the deepest life forces of Christianity and demonstrating that they are indispensable for solving the most urgent problems in contemporary culture.

Why We Publish
Humankind, just like each individual, needs a renewal arising from the depths of the spiritual world. For this, it is equally fruitless either to withdraw passively into the interiority of the soul, or to throw oneself into the outward exertion of moral effort or activist gesturing. Rather, what matters is that an active life of deeds gains nourishment from the blessing of inwardness in God and the wholesomeness of the pure atmosphere of Christ. No advance in the education of the masses, no religious renewal, is possible without applying Christianity to every sphere of personal and public life. The practical efficacy of the highest spiritual powers must be proved in the world as it is: man must take a creative and formative role in the world, becoming the master, not the servant, of chaotic physical reality.

We need a publishing house that will encourage Christians to take up the tasks required today: to oppose all lust for war, all caste attitudes, all mammonism, by letting the spirit of Christ rule. We need a publishing house, accordingly, that is attentive to all actions and events that resist the forces of self-interest, hatred, and arrogance, one that musters every element of truth wherever it may be found – doing so from a perspective that
You’ve hardly scratched the surface...

*Plough* aims to provoke, inspire, and equip readers to pursue a liberating, practical Christianity. Subscribe to *Plough Quarterly* today!

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