

Urgent Solidarity: Contextualizing John Paul II Solidarity In the Sri Lankan Context

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Abstract:

This article analyses Sri Lanka's current economic and political crisis, affecting 22 million citizens, through the lens of John Paul II's concept of 'structures of sin.' It identifies the root causes of underdevelopment, political instability, and minority marginalization, attributing these issues to policies such as the 'Sinhala Only Act,' 'Standardization,' 'State-Sponsored Colonization,' and the privileged status of Buddhism in national politics. These structures have exacerbated polarization and hindered the nation's potential for growth. In response, the article advocates for the virtue of solidarity, as outlined by John Paul II, as a remedy to these entrenched injustices. Solidarity emphasizes social interconnectedness and the pursuit of unity, suggesting that the Church, despite being a minority in Sri Lanka, can play a pivotal role in peacebuilding. By fostering interfaith collaboration and engaging with peace-promoting individuals, the Church can contribute to national reconciliation, fulfilling its prophetic mission. The study employs phenomenological and inductive methods. The phenomenological approach explores the lived experiences of Sri Lankans amid ethnic conflict and economic crisis, while the inductive method draws broader theological insights from specific observations. However, the analysis has limitations. It relies primarily on John Paul II's theological concepts, neglecting secular political and economic frameworks. It also narrowly focuses on selected structures of sin, overlooking global economic pressures, internal governance issues, and external actors. Furthermore, it prioritizes the Church's role, without fully considering civic, political, or international contributions. In conclusion, the article underscores the urgent need for solidarity to address Sri Lanka's economic crisis and foster peace. John Paul II's vision of solidarity offers a crucial framework for the country's path to recovery and human flourishing.

Keywords: Ethnic crisis, Discrimination, Structures of sin, Solidarity, Inclusivity.

Introduction

Sri Lanka, often called the pearl of the Indian Ocean, is blessed with abundant natural resources and rich in ethnic, religious, and cultural diversity. The nation is home to the four major religions of the world—Buddhism, Hinduism, Islam, and Christianity. According to Shanthi Mendis, Sri Lanka was “a nation on its way to becoming an upper-middle-income country” (Mendis, 2022, p. ix). However, the recent economic crisis in Sri Lanka is unprecedented since the country's independence in 1948. The severity of the situation is alarming, with the “future of the twenty-two million people at stake” (Mendis, 2022, p. ix). The economic collapse has resulted in

runaway inflation, pushing food prices to levels beyond the reach of most citizens. Fuel shortages have led to long queues at gas stations, crippling transportation and daily life. Hospitals are operating with limited resources, as shortages of essential medicines and equipment leave doctors and nurses struggling to treat patients. Malnutrition has surged, particularly among children and pregnant women, as families struggle to secure even a single meal a day. The collapse of the middle class is particularly evident, with many people unable to afford necessities such as food, fuel, and electricity. The educational system is also in disarray, with children attending school without adequate nourishment, clothing, or learning materials, exacerbating long-term prospects for the nation's recovery (CBCSL, 2023, p. 1). This crisis has also exposed deep-seated injustices and inequalities within Sri Lankan society. The most vulnerable populations, including ethnic minorities and low-income families, bear the brunt of these hardships. The failure of political leadership and rampant corruption have aggravated the situation, with the poor and marginalized suffering disproportionately. Sri Lanka's ethnic divisions, which have been historically manipulated by politicians for political gain, continue to fester, preventing a unified response to the crisis. Meanwhile, those in positions of power remain largely insulated from the economic pain that the majority of the population faces daily.

In addressing such crises, the Second Vatican Council introduced the method of reading the 'signs of the times,' emphasizing the Church's need to promote social justice. Following this, the Catholic Bishops' Conference of Sri Lanka (CBCSL) has undertaken extensive studies and analysis of the country's deteriorating situation, calling for urgent intervention. In its 2023 statement, the CBCSL underscored that “many people are on the brink of starvation” (CBCSL, 2023, p. 1). This echoed concerns raised in 2012, where it was reported that “there are families who cannot manage even one proper meal a day” (CBCSL, 2012, p. 8). With rampant inflation and a drastic depreciation of the local currency, the middle class struggles to survive. The lack of food and essential medicine has become a tragic reality, leaving hospitals unable to serve patients properly, while the education of children is in jeopardy due to parents' inability to meet their basic needs (CBCSL, 2023, p. 1). At this critical juncture, as children of Mother Lanka, we must ask why this crisis has struck us and how we can rebuild this beautiful island.

To understand the root causes and seek viable solutions, we turn to the theological framework provided by John Paul II in his social encyclical *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis*. His reflections on "structures of sin" and "solidarity" offer valuable insights into addressing the country's plight. John Paul II identified "structures of sin" as social systems that perpetuate injustice and inequality, which resonates with Sri Lanka's current situation where corruption, inequality, and ethnic tensions have deepened the crisis. Moreover, the relevance of John Paul II's concept of ethnic harmony in a nation as ethnically diverse as Sri Lanka cannot be overstated. He underscored the need for solidarity among all groups to ensure peace and development, as ethnic divisions exacerbate crises. Developing a theological framework based on John Paul II's insights into "structures of sin" and "solidarity" carries significant implications for both academic discourse and practical interventions in Sri Lanka. Academically, it provides a rich foundation for analyzing the intersections of theology, ethics, and social justice, offering scholars a lens to examine how deeply embedded systems of inequality can be challenged. Practically, such a framework can guide policymakers, religious leaders, and civil society in addressing the root causes of the current crisis by promoting ethical leadership, fostering inter-ethnic harmony, and prioritizing the well-being of the most vulnerable. This approach could pave the way for more inclusive and sustainable solutions, helping Sri Lanka build a future based on justice, solidarity, and human dignity. By applying his theological insights, Sri Lanka can aspire to overcome its current challenges, fostering human flourishing and building a more just and equitable society.

Research Problem

This discourse explores the urgent need for solidarity in Sri Lanka in response to the economic and political crisis. It examines the concepts of 'structures of sin' and 'solidarity' as articulated by Pope John Paul II, aiming to contextualize them within the Sri Lankan conflict. Ultimately, this article seeks to develop a theological framework for understanding and addressing the ethnic, economic, and social injustices that have paralyzed the country, emphasizing solidarity as a vital means to promote peace and prosperity in Sri Lanka.

Objectives

The objectives of this research are:

1. To contextualize the concepts of 'structures of sin' and 'solidarity' as articulated by Pope John Paul II within the Sri Lankan ethnic conflict.
2. To develop a theological framework for understanding and addressing the economic and social injustices that have paralyzed the country.
3. To emphasize the importance of solidarity as a means of promoting peace and prosperity in Sri Lanka.

Literature review

Shanthi Mendis (2022) critically examines the factors leading to Sri Lanka's bankruptcy, emphasizing the collapse of the medical sector, political dysfunction, human rights violations, and governmental corruption. As a medical officer, she underscores the urgent need for informed citizenry, urging Sri Lankans to elect responsible leaders in future elections.

John Paul II's *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis* (1987) identifies 'structures of sin' as the root cause of underdevelopment, manifesting in narcissistic governance and dysfunctional social, economic, and political systems that perpetuate inequality. He advocates solidarity as the remedy, emphasizing respect for all and a commitment to the common good.

In his 1989 essay, "Structures of Sin," Gregory Baum analyzes Pope John Paul II's *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis*, focusing on institutionalized systems that perpetuate injustice and inequality. Baum links these "structures of sin" to personal and collective moral failings, emphasizing their roots in selfishness and power. He advocates for both individual and systemic change, aligning with John Paul II's call for solidarity and justice. Baum's work underscores the relevance of "structures of sin" in addressing modern social and political injustices.

C. M. Kelly's (2020) concept of "everyday solidarity" offers a framework linking theological ethics with daily life. Kelly discusses solidarity and theological ethics, examining how her framework enriches contemporary discourse by highlighting the lived expression of ethical commitments in ordinary contexts.

Frerks and Van Leeuwens' (2004) chapter, *An Outline of the Conflict in Sri Lanka*, provides a focus on the origins, key actors and the complex socio-political dynamics of the ethnic conflicts. It

provides historical context of the context and origins of the conflict, escalation and phases of the conflict, role of international actors, its socio-political impact and the peace process and challenges.

In her article, "Building Peace in Sri Lanka: A Role for Civil Society?" Camilla Orjuela examines the role of civil society in the peacemaking process in Sri Lanka. She highlights the significant role civil society can play in conflict resolution and discusses the challenges it faces in peacebuilding.

The Pastoral Letters of the Bishops' Conference of Sri Lanka (1984, 2013 & 2022) reflect on the country's socio-political and religious landscape, fulfilling the Church's prophetic mission by "reading the signs of the times." Through these letters, the bishops critically assess the prevailing circumstances, offering guidance rooted in Church teachings. Notably, the letters acknowledge historical errors that have deeply affected the nation. They propose remedies centered on justice, reconciliation, and solidarity among ethnic, religious, and social groups, advocating for dialogue, understanding, and cooperation to build a peaceful and inclusive Sri Lanka.

Research Goals

While the article provides a comprehensive overview of the economic and political crisis in Sri Lanka and emphasizes the importance of solidarity in addressing these issues, there are several gaps in the research that warrant further exploration:

1. Although the article briefly touches on the historical background of the ethnic crisis in Sri Lanka, a more in-depth analysis of the historical factors leading to the crisis would provide a richer understanding of the ethnic conflict in the country.
2. While the article highlights the need for solidarity between the majority and minority communities in Sri Lanka, the role of the international community in expressing solidarity and contributing to peace and reconciliation efforts is an area that could be further developed.

3. The article primarily focuses on solidarity in the context of ethnic conflict, but other important issues, such as gender equality, caste discrimination, and environmental degradation, also require the application of solidarity and deserve further attention.

Methodology

This research employs phenomenological and inductive methods as research tools. The phenomenological method is used to study the experiences of the people in Sri Lanka, particularly to understand their lived experiences in the context of the ethnic conflict and the current economic and political crisis. The existing narratives, such as firsthand accounts, testimonies, and written reflections from Sri Lankan citizens, were analyzed to understand their lived experiences. By immersing in these accounts, the research seeks to uncover the underlying structures of meaning that inform the people's perceptions of the ethnic conflict and its ongoing socio-political impact.

The inductive method complements this by moving from specific observations gathered through these interviews and narratives to broader generalizations and theories. The patterns, themes, and insights derived from the phenomenological analysis are synthesized to formulate a theological vision of the ethnic problem at hand. Through this process, the research aims to construct a deeper, more grounded understanding of the conflict and to offer theological perspectives that are informed by the real-life experiences of those affected.

Discussion and Results

The Concept of 'Structures of Sin' according to John Paul II

In the social encyclical *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis*, John Paul II offers a “theological reading of modern problems” and addresses the phenomenon of underdevelopment in third-world countries. According to him, the root cause of this underdevelopment is the phenomenon of the *structures of sin* prevalent in these countries. These structures of sin are formed and consolidated over time within society, becoming increasingly difficult to remove. Over time, they breed more such structures, perpetuating social and moral injustices. Mark Charlton points out that “human selfishness and shortsightedness become institutionalized within social structures in a way that

magnifies and perpetuates the moral evil of individuals within the very structures of the international community” (Charlton, 2007, p. 212). Baum (1989) points out two key attitudes underlying structures of sin: the all-consuming desire for profit and the thirst for power at the expense of others. When these attitudes are institutionalized, they create social systems that violate human dignity, leading to poverty, inequality, and other forms of social evil.

According to John Paul II, the prevalence of injustice and inequality in the world cannot be understood without a social analysis of the concept of *structures of sin*. These sinful structures are “rooted in personal sin, and thus always linked to the concrete act of individuals who introduce these structures, consolidate them, and make them difficult to remove” (*Sollicitudo Rei Socialis*, no. 36). After analysing these structures, John Paul II asserts that the real antidote for the structures of sin is the virtue of solidarity. The concepts of structures of sin and solidarity provide a moral compass to navigate the current crisis in Sri Lanka and move towards peace and prosperity.

Structures of Sin in Sri Lanka

According to Shanthi Mendis, the reason for the current crisis in Sri Lanka is the “populist policies of politicians and misplaced nationalism” (Mendis, 2022, p. ix). She points out that “successive governments are accountable for what happened through acts of commission and acts of omission” (Mendis, 2022, p. ix). Over the years, acts of both commission and omission have become entrenched as structures of evil and injustice, leading the country into its current vacuum. While outlining the conflict in Sri Lanka, Frerks and van Leeuwen (2004) point out that, in addition to the historical grievances between the Sinhala majority and Tamil minority and the colonial legacies, the root cause lies in the post-independence discriminatory policies, particularly in language and education.

When analysing the structures of sin in Sri Lanka, the first notable structure is the *Sinhala Only Act* of 1956, which revoked the equal status of Sinhala and Tamil as official languages. According to the CBCSL, “the preference accorded to the Sinhala language and culture over the culture of other minorities severely strained national unity” (CBCSL, 2012, p. 5). This act led to the displacement of Tamils from their jobs as they were required to learn Sinhala within a specific

timeframe, while simultaneously creating more employment opportunities for Sinhalese individuals. This is a clear instance of the majority discriminating against the Tamil minority. The requirement to know Sinhala created insecurity among Tamils and led to increased unemployment among Tamil youth. This discriminatory policy unconsciously instilled in the minds of the Sinhala majority a sense of “Sinhala Supremacy,” systematically resulting in the denial of the rights and dignity of the Tamil minority. This legal measure harmed ethnic harmony in the country. Since the language of the majority became the official language, neither group felt inclined to learn the language of the other, nor did they see the necessity to learn English, the link language. Dr. Colvin R. De Silva foresaw this issue and warned Sri Lankan politicians, saying, “Two languages, one nation; one language, two nations” (quoted in CBCSL, 2013, p. 5). Thus, in Sri Lanka, language, which should have been a tool for ethnic harmony and authentic development, unfortunately became a means of discrimination. This lack of communication between the two groups became one of the main reasons they could not coexist peacefully as citizens of a single nation.

In 1970, the Sri Lankan government announced a new policy of *standardization* that escalated the ethnic conflict within education. Its aim was to “increase access to higher studies for Sinhala students” (Hateez, p. 67) and to restrict the number of Tamil students entering universities. “Since the 1970s, access to education, particularly higher education, has been ethnicized” (Perera, 2001, p. 11). Tamils placed high value on education and excelled in missionary-run schools, which enabled them to secure government positions. To stop this phenomenon, the government introduced the standardization policy, which became the second structure of evil, further deepening the ethnic divide in the country.

The third structure of evil in Sri Lanka is the state-sponsored colonization of the majority Sinhala population in traditional Tamil areas, which have historically been the homeland of the Tamils. Successive governments encouraged Sinhala settlements in the north-central and eastern parts of Sri Lanka over the years. Today, under the pretext of archaeological findings, many Hindu temples have been transformed overnight into Buddhist temples. This disrespectful treatment and discrimination have widened the division between the two groups. These settlements have led to the marginalization of Tamils and significantly affected the demographic balance in Tamil areas.

Sasanka Perera notes that the “Sinhala population, which constituted 3% of the population in the Trincomalee District in 1921, had risen to 30% by 1981” (Perera, 2001, p. 18).

In addition to the above structures of sin, political corruption and economic inequality have also contributed to the current economic and political crisis. Inequitable resource allocation and discriminatory policies have marginalized minority groups. Furthermore, political corruption, characterized by nepotism and the misuse of state power for personal gain, has adversely affected the country. Successive governments in Sri Lanka have followed populist policies to consolidate power rather than implementing long-term economic development strategies. As a result, economic and political corruption have reinforced and consolidated these structures of sin, further exacerbating the current crisis.

As a result of these structures, ethnic harmony was destroyed. Following the communal violence of 1983, the CBCSL issued a clear warning in 1984 about the consequences of these discriminatory policies: “Conflict and division are harmful to all, which will invite foreign intervention, making all groups lose not only freedom but also our civilized and humane way of living” (CBCSL, 1984, pp. 3-4). This warning has now become a reality, leading to bankruptcy and severe economic difficulties. Consequently, the CBCSL now clearly emphasizes the need to work toward “living together in peace and harmony in the context of a multi-ethnic population” (CBCSL, 1984, p. 2). This is where the concept of solidarity can serve as a remedy to forge a united Sri Lankan nation, where people can embrace a sense of nationhood through the principle of unity in diversity.

The Concept of Solidarity

In the encyclical *Sollicitudo rei Socialis*, John Paul II “calls for conversion towards solidarity and option for the poor” to overcome the structures of sin and underdevelopment in societies (Deberri, 2005, 88). According to John Pual II, the antidote for the structures of sin is the virtue of solidarity. In Sri Lanka, the structures of sin that developed and consolidated over the years have led to discrimination against minorities. This discrimination has marginalized the polarized minorities. Currently, there is such polarization in the country that the members of the majority and the minority not only fail to see each other as brothers of the same land but also

perceive themselves as enemies. At this point, John Paul II's concept of solidarity can provide a theological framework needed for the work of reconciliation in this country. D. J. Daly (2011) points out that while vices corrupt moral character and lead to destructive actions, virtues are habitual dispositions toward good that shape moral character and foster human flourishing. This is why John Paul II defines solidarity as a virtue to overcome the evil structures in society.

According to John Pual II, Solidarity means “the urgent need to *change the spiritual attitudes* which define each individual's relationship with self, with neighbor, with even the remotest human communities and nature itself” (SRS 38.3). He emphasizes the need for a fundamental change in the way individuals in a community view and relate to themselves, their neighbors, and nature. Thus, solidarity implies a deep interconnectedness among the members of a community so that they act not out of enmity but out of compassion and empathy. As John Paul II envisions, moral conversion is an essential component to overcoming the “moral obstacles to development” (SRS 38.5).

The virtue of solidarity signifies interdependence, and it is described as “a moral and social attitude” (SRS 38.6). It is not “a feeling of vague compassion or shallow distress at the misfortune of so many people, both near and far” (SRS 38.6). Solidarity is not the area of mere sentimentality expressed at the misfortunes of people in society, but it signifies a deep commitment to work for the promotion of the common good by taking concrete action. Hence, solidarity, “is *a firm and preserving 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 responsible *for all*” (SRS 38.6). John Paul II defines solidarity as the shared responsibility of every member of society to work towards the well-being of each other in the community. The primary step in solidarity is the recognition of “one another as persons” (SRS 39.1).

More importantly, 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, with a work capacity and physical strength to be exploited at low cost and then discarded when no longer useful, but as our ‘neighbor,’ a ‘helper’ (Cf. Gen 2:18-20), to be made a sharer, on a par with ourselves, in the banquet of life to which all are equally invited by God” (SRS 39.5). Here, John Paul II delves into the core of Catholic social teaching, where we are all invited to view others in society as persons in the

society with inherent dignity and as equal to us. Finally, John Paul II views the virtue of solidarity as an important component of the attainment of true peace.

Application of the Concept of Solidarity in Sri Lanka

In Sri Lanka, the ethnic tensions in the past had left horrendous marks in the lines of ethnic, religious, social, and cultural lines. What is required of all Sri Lankans today is forge a shared humanity on the beautiful island and wipe away divisions that have fostered enmity. Considering the challenges faced by the country, it is crucial to rediscover our common humanity and emphasize our interconnectedness as people of one country. Discriminatory practices in the past have marginalized minorities, highlighting the importance of creating an inclusive society in Sri Lanka where priority is given to marginalized minorities. Alongside minorities, the needs of the marginalized, the poor, and the disadvantaged must be prioritized in Sri Lanka.

As a means of consolidating solidarity in Sri Lanka, the CBCSL proposes trilingual competency. Bridging the Language gap is crucial. Trilingualism, coupled with equality in employment has the potential to break down divisive barriers and promote unity in the country. Specifically equipping the children and youth with mastery of three languages can not only promote ethnic harmony but also open new windows for all the children in Sri Lanka to empathize with others. The CBCSL goes further and proposes a radical recommendation:

“It is also our conviction that trilingual capability should be made a compulsory condition for the conferring of university degrees on graduates. Besides that, it is also necessary to ensure that the provisions of the National Language Act are further strengthened and that public and private sector employment, especially in those positions that deal with people’s day-to-day lives, is opened only to those who have mastered the three languages” (CBCSL, 2013, 7).

The suggestion made by CBCSL is a commendable step to promote linguistic harmony and inclusivity in Sri Lanka.

The important mission of the Church in Sri Lanka

According to John Paul II, “man is the primary route for the Church,” meaning that the Church’s primary focus should be on humanity in the present situation. Currently, the Church has an important mission for the people in Sri Lanka. For the Church the present time is “a time of

grave responsibility, spiritual crisis, and moral challenge” (CBCSL, 1984, p. 25). The mission of the Church needs to collaborate with the people of goodwill of other religions as well. Despite being a minority in Sri Lanka, the Church has members in both the minority and majority communities. It can play a big role in building solidarity in the country. U. J. Njoku (2008) further develops and expand its meaning in response to the contemporary challenges of the world. According to him solidarity is not mere passive concept that points to the mutual responsibility towards one another in society, but an active and dynamic concept that calls people for a radical commitment to justice, peace and transformation of unjust social structures. Thus, according to him solidarity is rooted in the lived experience to people that urges all individuals to work for greater social justice and protection of human rights.

The Church can work very much towards building this interconnectedness among the people of both communities. The Church can contribute a lot towards overcoming these sinful structures. On a positive note, the Church can work towards solidarity, reconciliation, and peace by working with families and by organizing awareness programs at the parish level and diocesan level. Moving beyond the structures of the Church, the Church too can join hands with the members of other religions to work towards transforming society. Since all religions have the responsibility to work towards peace and reconciliation, there is a great responsibility of all religions to work towards peace and prosperity in Sri Lanka. An important means of overcoming discrimination and moving towards solidarity is the formation of grassroots communities consisting of members of all religions to work for the common good of the people.

Conclusion

The current economic crisis and political instability in Sri Lanka call for serious consideration of how this country could become a country of human flourishing and peace. The Catholic Bishops’ Conference of Sri Lanka in 2023 has highlighted the seriousness of the situation and called for concerted action to remedy this situation. At this juncture, the theological framework of John Paul II can provide a moral compass to navigate this moment of crisis in Sri Lanka. John Paul II’s notion of ‘structures of sin’ sheds light on the deep-seated injustices and inequalities that have developed and consolidated over the years, becoming the means for discriminating against

marginalizing minorities in the country. To work towards peace and prosperity, there is a need to fight against these structures to bring about a change in the attitude of the people.

In this context, the concept of solidarity can become a tool to combat these unjust structures and promote interconnectedness and solidarity among all the people of this country. Solidarity also calls for the promotion of an inclusive society as opposed to discrimination and marginalization. The recommendations for trilingualism by the Catholic Bishops' Conference can become an important step toward inclusivity and ethnic harmony in this country. Further, within the church, as well as working with the people of other religions, the Church can play a significant role in promoting solidarity, reconciliation, and peace in Sri Lanka. Kelly (2020) points out that solidarity, as a theological virtue, must be lived out in daily actions. He proposes that solidarity should be understood as a commitment to the common good, which can be expressed by members of society in various mundane and interpersonal ways, such as small acts of care and support between individuals. Osewska, E., & Simonič, B. (2019) point out that, through solidarity, John Paul II envisioned a "civilization of love," a vision rooted in Christian anthropology that emphasizes the dignity of every human person and the central role of love in social and moral life. Ultimately, the concept of Solidarity as developed by John Paul II can provide a theological framework for the Church to promote interconnectedness among all the people in the country, where all the individuals are valued and empowered; all these are very essential for the peace and prosperity in Sri Lanka. Moving beyond the Church, Camilla Orjuela (2003) points out the involvement of civil society in peacebuilding through various actors, including NGOs and community groups. These actors play an important role in fostering dialogue, reconciliation, and advocacy. They can promote a culture of peace by addressing the root causes of the conflict, such as ethnic tensions, inequality, and human rights violations.

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