

THE VERY POOR, LIVING PROOF OF THE INDIVISIBILITY OF HUMAN RIGHTS

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INTRODUCTION

Today more than ever before, human nature and destiny are the center of attention. For aren't they the real subject of all debates and struggles that focus on human rights throughout the world?

Yet forty years after the United Nations' Universal Declaration on human rights, achievement is more limited than many had hoped; more limited, too, than we had long imagined in our Western democracies. The world is not, as we had thought, divided into countries where human rights prevail and countries where they are less fully, or not yet, respected. The extreme poverty which has resurfaced in rich countries where its existence had been forgotten is now understood as a systematic violation of all fundamental human rights. There are therefore serious infringements of human rights in every country, which are not accidental but inherent in the way people organize their lives in the national and international community.

It is understandable that the National Advisory Commission on Human Rights, which was set up to examine a great variety of specific situations and laws, was not prepared to leave it at that. Moreover, reflection on the very foundations of rights said to be inalienable was called for since it had not been attempted in present times, either in France, or anywhere else. I would like to try to contribute to that effort by setting out the main lines of what the poorest have taught me. I have had the privilege of sharing their lives and their struggle in Western Europe, in Africa, in the Americas and in the Far East, both as a man born to a very poor family and as a priest of the Roman Catholic Church. What follows is a sketch of a lifelong inquiry prompted by people deprived of all rights.

The very poor revealed to me the day-to-day realities of life which unite them across cultures and continents and which mean that they all live as outlaws, everywhere. These realities led them to choose the term « Fourth World » to designate themselves as a people outside all the worlds that others have fashioned for themselves. I also wish to bear witness to the active refusal to accept that situation, demonstrated both by its victims and by those who have chosen to stand with them. This refusal is based, in all parts of the world, on a concept of the human being endowed with the right to responsibilities and to the means of carrying them out for the good of all. It is a concept of the human person who is indivisible and thereby bearer of indivisible rights and responsibilities. And it is a concept of the human person who is indivisible, and part of an indivisible humanity, whose members cannot be dissociated and in whose mission and destiny the poorest must participate.

As Michel Mollat pointed out, all major advances towards a greater degree of humanity have been achieved, through the centuries, by turning back to the very poor. I would add that, unfortunately, what is owed to the poor from age to age is soon forgotten. Today we seem to have forgotten that it is to the poor that we owe the concept of the human beings born equal and free and therefore entitled to participate as an equal, free and indispensable partner in the life of their community.

This conception seems to be acceptable to all people, whatever their cultural or spiritual allegiances. In the view of the very poor, all human beings are invested with the same mission, namely to advance the right of all to receive the means to be and to act in accordance with their true grandeur.

A PEOPLE DEPRIVED OF THE RIGHT TO INHABIT THE EARTH

From the very earliest time in my childhood to the present day, the poorest have always seemed to me to be families -a whole people -who were forbidden to inhabit the world of others, to inhabit cities, countries, the whole earth. For could we really use the term “inhabit” to describe the way they were obliged to huddle together, to dig themselves in, to find whatever shelter they could in a slum on the edge of which my own family lived in a hovel? These were people relegated to down-town Angers, occupying attics, a few rooms around a courtyard that never saw the sun, to a windowless alcove at the end of a hallway, to a basement never intended to serve as a home to human beings. By virtue of the very misery of their accommodation, they were regarded as unworthy to ever inhabit the neighboring community of somewhat less unfortunate families. “Shut up. How do you expect anyone to take you seriously, living the way you do?”

Later on, as a rural priest, invited to Sunday dinner with one of the more prosperous farmers of my parish, I saw seasonal laborers also invited to a meal but seated at a different place. They came from the rudimentary lodgings lent to them only for the duration of their contract, to sit at the foot of the main table, where only soup was served, while the guests at the farmer’s side were getting a full meal. These were laborers whose housing, wherever they went, was always temporary and whose very identity as Sunday guests was in line with their identity as poor people, to be accommodated and fed at the least possible cost, for just as long as they were useful. These were men and families who, in winter, had to seek refuge in a cabin somewhere out in the woods, in a shelter of earth and branches dug into a hillside to keep the water out, or in an abandoned barn.

I finally arrived at the camp for the homeless at Noisy-le-Grand, a forgotten outpost where several hundred families with over a thousand children between them lived in “igloos” of asbestos cement which, elsewhere in France, were reserved for pigs. Even there, they were allowed to live only temporarily, for how could these “lepers” be authorized to reside so close to the city of Paris for long? There, too, I found families treated as objects of official measures of assistance and control, rather than as people endowed with rights. They were families identified only in negative terms: “asocial,” “maladjusted,” “difficult,” “problem families”; even the more or less neutral label “homeless” had finally been taken from them.

Then came the years when the ATD Movement began to spread around the world, and my travels took me across Europe and to other continents. Everywhere I found the same denial of the right of the poorest to inhabit the earth and to exist in the eyes of others: homeless families in major North American cities who had their identity as a family wiped out by being crowded together in « Welfare hotels », mothers and children on one side, and fathers on the

other. Families in Latin America who had fled the countryside and famine to cling to the edge of a ravine near the capital. In some of these cases, births and deaths were not even recorded, since people should not dwell in these places where no residence was allowed. When tropical rains swept a cabin into the abyss, the children in it would have lived and died without ever having existed officially. Nor did the families living on marshland on the edge of a bay somewhere in the West Indies exist in national records or international statistics. They were committing an offence by being there at all, and when the bulldozer showed up to prepare the site for another purpose, nobody would ever know how many hundreds of huts and humble possessions were being reduced to dust. Nobody would know where these families, unwanted anywhere, were now roaming or hiding.

Nor would anyone ever know what had become of the poorest and sickest inhabitants of sub-Saharan villages ravaged by river blindness. Disabled for life by the disease of onchocerciasis, they were temporarily forced into exile with their neighbors onto more arid land which could not provide enough to feed them. What had become of the most fragile among these families who, unlike their neighbors, were unable to return to their villages, once these had been freed from the disease by a vast international sanitary program? We know that some were pushed farther into the bush, that others sought refuge in town: blind men asking for alms on Friday at the mosque, children living on the street.

What do we really know about these children who in all developing continents earn their own living, beg or steal their subsistence or sometimes that of their entire family? What do we know about the children who spend the night on the edge of a slaughterhouse and at dawn comb the city's refuse? Should we not admit that they represent the inevitable, final outcome of the inhuman refusal to let the very poor inhabit the earth, an outcome for which we, in rich countries, are perhaps not always willing to recognize our joint responsibility?

Is there any fundamental difference between the extreme poverty of those who are deprived of their rights in distant countries and the deep poverty endured by a family in Ile-de-France (Paris' region)? I am thinking of a family who in 1987 had spent the last four years huddled under the ruins of a derelict house in an abandoned, isolated village at the edge of the airport at Roissy-en-France. They had no recognized address, no work, no voting cards and no possibility of sending their children to school, yet they were hounded for squatting and the airport was demanding 10,000 francs in damages. The family was on record with the police, but did not even exist on the records of the school or housing authorities. In an effort to hasten their departure, the local authorities cut off their only water supply, which was in a nearby cemetery.

In short, the poorer people are, then the smaller is their hut, the flimsier their shelter, the more cramped and unhealthy their shack in the most vermin-infested part of a shantytown, the farther they are from any source of water, however stagnant and polluted, and the lower they must bend in order to enter the crowded living space where over-population rules out any possibility of a harmonious existence. Insecure living conditions generate unstable relationships; friendship among neighbors, love between couples and between parents and children become equally insecure. This is how disorder and violence spring up and how, little by little, through their misery, families become undesirable, a source of repugnance and fear for the surrounding society. If they haven't already taken flight, they are hounded down and they have no chance of gaining any right of occupancy, however temporary or precarious.

For the poor who have become homeless, at the end of the road lie the wastelands, the woods, the temporarily unoccupied city fringes where the bulldozer may well arrive tomorrow. At the

end of the road we find squatting, illegal occupation, and for children, nights spent under the stalls of a market or in a cinema entrance and days devoted to surviving on the streets, in the car parks, or on the beaches of the big cities.

The end of the road is, above all, this slipping from an identity that is already negative to a kind of non-identity, an administrative non-existence, the disappearance from every register, every set of statistics. Human beings, whole families then take on the appearance of ghosts: they have been seen somewhere, but nobody remembers where exactly nor how many they were. For them it is the end of all hope of still being among those who once proclaimed themselves to be «We, the peoples of the United Nation, » that international community which chose the achievement of human rights as its ultimate goal. The loss of identity also sounds the death knell of any hope that, because one exists in the eyes of the world, one may join forces with others, in order to fight for one's rights together. The poorer people are, the more they are deprived of the right to inhabit the earth, and the more they need to join forces across continents. Yet, unfortunately, the poorer they are, the fewer rights they have, the less free they are to unite in common struggle. Without identity, they are deprived of a history of their own and excluded from the history of their people. They are prohibited from belonging to any group which, in the name of its past and present history, would have a common goal to pursue in the future.

These are the facts; but what is most important is the suffering that lurks behind these facts. Extreme poverty, since it cuts out all human rights, is an unbearable waste of human intelligence, inventiveness, hope and love. It means throwing away an incalculable capital of men, women and children who are banned from all justice, all administration, all communities and all democracy. And above all, behind the silence of our records and our statistics lie children mutilated in their heart and spirit, young people condemned to despair, adults driven to doubt their very humanity and human dignity.

For the very poor tell us over and over again that man's greatest misfortune is not to be hungry or unable to read, nor even to be without work. The greatest misfortune of all is to know that you count for nothing, to the point where even your suffering is ignored. The worst blow of all is the contempt on the part of your fellow citizens. For it is that contempt which stands between a human being and his rights. It makes the world disdain what you are going through and prevents you from being recognized as worthy and capable of taking on responsibility. The greatest misfortune of extreme poverty is that for your entire existence you are like someone already dead.

PEOPLE WHO STRUGGLE TO CLAIM THEIR DIGNITY

It was in rich countries that we rediscovered the extreme poverty which humiliates people, destroys their identity and turns their existence into unending heartbreak. It is true that for several decades, the West had seemed not to have recognized that extreme poverty still existed within its borders. The very poor had apparently become so insignificant a minority that society at large had wiped them out of its memory. Yet it is also true that during the same period some men and women have continued to bear witness to a Fourth World, trapped at the bottom of the social ladder. They were the ones who refused society's forgetfulness. As citizens of their times they have brought about progress in two ways. First, we owe them the re-definition of poverty in terms of human rights. Second, they forged new links with the poorest, based on the recognition of both their hardships and their hopes.

It is obvious that our countries can no longer claim the success they thought they had achieved in ensuring inalienable human rights. Yet, in recognizing their failure, they have made significant progress in understanding the link between extreme poverty and the indivisibility of those rights. Let us recall here the definition adopted by the French Economic and Social Council in its report, "Chronic Poverty and Lack of Basic Security," on February 11, 1987: "Situations of extreme poverty result from of a series of insecurities which persistently affect several areas of existence, jeopardizing a person's chances of reassuming their responsibilities and regaining their rights independently in the foreseeable future."

This definition is a milestone and, while there is still a long way to go before it will be reflected in political thinking and policy-making, its very existence represents an advance which cannot be undone.

Moreover, the establishment of more and more ties of solidarity and partnership with families who had ceased to count in the eyes of their country also seems to represent a remarkable step forward. Without it, we could have gone on for a long time ignoring both the suffering caused by the absence of all rights and the obstinate refusal of individuals and families to be deprived of an honorable identity. By continuing to reduce them to silence, we would have failed to understand that their very existence is a cry for help. The renewal of these special links, even if for the moment they are maintained only by ordinary citizens and their non-governmental organizations, means that our renewed efforts to establish human rights must begin with the poorest. We are bound to do so because they, who have been cheated of their identity as human beings entitled to rights and liberties, are the ones who have most to teach us. Furthermore, we now realize that they themselves are our most important allies in this new struggle, because they are the first to resist their exclusion and to understand the conditions under which it can be reversed.

In the member states of the European Community, when families are deprived to the point where they can no longer buy shoes for their children or detergent to wash their clothes, their acts of resistance often remain invisible to our eyes. How many times have I met men who no longer dare to present themselves at the employment agency because even their appearance precluded them from obtaining a job? I have seen them working for a pittance at filthy, illegal jobs (cleaning, digging, carrying loads far beyond their strength, rat-extermination...), crying with shame unknown even to their families. And do we realize how much courage it takes to endure the inspections and the unending question about one's own and one's family's private life which dependence on social assistance entails? Who, among the poorest, has escaped feeling that no one believes him? What man in deepest poverty has never been accused of play-acting, what woman has never been told that she was making up a story when going through the inevitable administrative process to receive aid? What parents have never been suspected of having ulterior motives in not sending their children to school, when in fact they could not give them the breakfast they needed to walk the four kilometers to school from their rundown housing estate deprived of a school bus service? What children from the Fourth World have never been called liars for telling the teacher that they stayed home to mind the smaller children because their mother was sick? What children in poverty have never been overcome with shame, because a teacher took it on herself to hand them clean clothes in front of their classmates?

Yet, sooner or later, the children return to school, the men go back to their distasteful jobs and the women turn again to the social services or the parish aid society. Even if nerves occasionally crack, or if some turn in despair to violence or drink, in no other section of society have I ever witnessed such an urge to do the right thing, so many failures for want of knowing how

to do things right and so many efforts not to remain beaten for long. How can these families, with their obscure existence, devoid of any outward sign of dignity, owning nothing and finding it impossible to maintain any family or community life, avoid resigning themselves to despair and hatred? Knocked down and humiliated to such a degree, why do they not give up altogether? Yet every day in the run-down apartment buildings, the streets, the housing estates of the underclass, we see people get on their feet again, families take a new lease on life and parents face up to their difficulties again. To the rare onlookers who express admiration, they say that they do it “for the children.” In a lower voice some will add: “We are human beings after all.”

Are things any different for the very poor in developing countries? So much has been said about apathetic populations who could not see where their interests lay, imprisoned as they were in cultures opposed to change. On our part, we have been witnesses to the contrary far too often to believe that human beings anywhere, however poor they are, would be capable of resigning themselves to extreme poverty as their natural lot. True, we have seen families and entire villages hanging on to their ancient farming tradition which exhausted the body without providing enough food to eat. Yet, they did so not because they were opposed to change, but because no one guaranteed them that change would not plunge them even deeper into irrevocable poverty. We have seen mothers in sub-Saharan shantytowns fill the mouths of their newborn babies with pap early in the morning to last them through the day, while they walked barefoot for miles themselves to find some sort of work in town. These mothers refused outright to leave their children in orphanages, because they knew only too well that they would never get them back again.

As one woman told me, “The poor have to work without skills or trades. And they live only because they don’t want to die. But that isn’t really living life, for life isn’t like that...” So what does she think life ought to be? “Life is never having to beg; it is being respected and being addressed with dignity. When my boss insults me, I don’t say anything. I just remind myself that the hand that gives is always above the hand that receives. I stay quiet for my children’s sake. But my boss isn’t God. For God knows who I am.”

The international seminar on “The Family, Extreme Poverty and Development,” held at UNESCO in June 1987, asserted that the poorest around the world stayed alive essentially through their own efforts and through the support of their fellow citizens and small local NGOs who were on their side. It was this, perhaps clumsy, ineffective, empty-handed but infinitely persistent refusal to give up, which was proclaimed before the major inter-governmental agencies. The same seminar proclaimed the absolute necessity of respect for all human rights and the extent to which they are all interdependent in the lives of the poorest everywhere in the world. Even if in theory they have political freedom, the illiterate, the long-term unemployed and families entirely dependent on welfare are politically helpless in industrialized countries. Similarly, freedom of opinion, of expression and association are a dead letter for families who live on the edge of deserts in developing countries, overwhelmed by sickness and poverty and getting a meal only once every two or three days.

The existence of the poorest on all continents proves that to grant civil and political liberties without providing the practical means to exercise them may well be worse than to deny them altogether. To grant them simply means to deepen the isolation of the poorest and to humiliate them for not behaving like free citizens, when that is what they are entitled to be. It is a way of binding them hand and foot to the whims of those who have the wherewithal to exercise their freedom. Similarly, to see oneself arbitrarily allotted from above a meager income, any kind of unpleasant work, any miserable housing, without being in a position to voice one’s

opinion, to make one's own choices, to negotiate or to refuse an offer, means being reduced to the status of a second-class citizen. In one capital city in Western Europe all families who are without employment, without resources or who are receiving the minimum guaranteed income from the State are relegated to the derelict quarters of the city. Elsewhere, authorities automatically split up homeless families or force them to move into apartments without proper sanitation which are unfit for family life. What is the meaning of the freedom to choose one's residence or the freedom of movement for people in extreme poverty, whether they live in the North or the South?

Judging from what these groups teach us, the very poor pay for the rights which are accorded to them piecemeal with an increased load of humiliation, dependence and contempt. "Could they not maintain the wells and tractors that we provided?"; we ask, forgetting that in regions ravaged by famine we also need to provide the people with the adequate means of making new ways of agricultural development their own and to offer them the chance to make their own choices. We readily think that "those people have no political sense," when inhabitants of the poorest parts of European cities abstain from voting. This is an accusation that the people themselves cannot answer, for in their areas the schools have been under-equipped and overcrowded for generations. Many adults cannot read the political platforms; in any case, their opinion is not asked for when these platforms are being drawn up.

For the poorest, it appears that only a campaign to have all human rights respected can safeguard their human dignity. Is it not precisely our preoccupation with the achievement of now one category of human rights, now another, that has made us lose sight of what ought to be the very purpose and *raison d'être* of all these rights, namely, the recognition of the inalienable dignity of every human being? What other reason or excuse can there be for our societies allowing some of their members to be exposed to a destructive misery beyond poverty and life's uncertainties and failing to mobilize all their resources to put an end to that disgrace?

A VISION OF HUMANITY AS THE SOURCE OF RESPONSIBILITIES AND RIGHTS

Presenting extreme poverty as an issue to be taken up by the defenders of human rights was, as we have said, an innovation. It did not fail to surprise the public in our democratic, Western countries. The experience of the French Economic and Social Council made that clear to us. In line with its terms of reference, the Council chose to consider and give the government its opinion on an economic and social reality which the nation was finding increasingly disturbing. Logically, its analysis led it to ask whether the inalienable rights guaranteed by the Constitution were actually being applied; of necessity, the existence of extreme poverty called into question the proper functioning and even the very authenticity of our democracy. The Economic and Social Council therefore called for further consideration of the matter and an improvement of the guarantees offered. Today, we can see just how profoundly that demand upsets certain well-established ways of defining and defending human rights.

In France, no doubt, as in the rest of the European Community, we were entitled to feel reasonably satisfied with our achievements in implementing the 1948 Universal Declaration. In the field of civil and political liberties, in particular, we felt we had successes to our credit which were above all reproach. And then out of the very heart of our democracies these questions suddenly arose: For whom had these liberties been recognized? Why not for everybody? How can we explain the outlaw situation of the very poor? And if they continue to be excluded, have we really moved on from a society of privileges to a society of human rights? The Economic and Social Council affirmed, proof in hand, that the poor were still with us; but

it also demonstrated that the most deprived of our fellow citizens, because of what we were putting them through, were witnesses to all our deviations from our convictions, our ideals, and our declarations.

Here was a disconcerting conclusion which raised another disconcerting question: Had we been right in asserting that there existed a certain hierarchy among rights which had all been declared equally inalienable? Was it reasonable to distinguish civil and political liberties as having priority and being in some way nobler than other rights? Were they really easier to implement than economic, social and cultural rights, the state supposedly merely having to abstain from interfering in order to allow every citizen to enjoy them? Had we taken the right line in creating a division within a set of rights which our governments in the United Nations' General Assembly had declared indivisible and interdependent?

In the face of these questions, which were disturbing even for the most sincere defenders of human rights, we could not expect rapid changes. How could we change the course of history which had led countries to cross swords in the United Nations' Commission on Human Rights on the priority some wanted accorded to civil and political liberties and others to economic, social and cultural rights? In that forum, as in our national and European bodies, a consensus on dealing seriously with the topic of "extreme poverty and the indivisibility of human rights" remains difficult to achieve. At the rally of defenders of human rights held on the Plaza of Human Rights and Liberties in Paris on October 17, 1987, nearly one hundred thousand men and women, poor and better-off, from all backgrounds, did indeed declare that extreme poverty was a violation of human rights. Some fifty non-governmental organizations, of a variety of allegiances, came together that day to back the very poor, for whom October 17 is now a date which gives real significance to their sufferings and to their struggle. It was certainly a step forward, perhaps a new departure; yet, after this event, everything still remained to be done to strengthen awareness and translate the alliance with the unemployed, the illiterate, the indigent, and the homeless into concrete action.

This slow progress, inevitable as it may seem, is perhaps due in the first instance to our lack of experience of what life is really like for those whom excessive poverty reduces to inescapable dependence on the goodwill of others. Our society as a whole has lost contact with that experience and perhaps we no longer know what it means to have no concrete means of making oneself heard, of proclaiming one's existence, of demonstrating one's humanity and defending one's cause.

But if we were able for so long to ignore the experience and thought of an entire segment of humanity, including citizens of our own country, are we really serious about knowing the true basis for human rights? In the name of what definition of the human being does a person have absolute rights? On what basis can those rights be withdrawn? Are these not the basic questions addressed to our declarations and conventions by those who have nothing but their humanity and not a single visible supplementary achievement to offer in return for the rights granted? Why are we declared to be born equal and free? Since the rights recognized on that assumption are systematically denied to some, is it our opinion that there are sub-humans among us, human beings born or progressively led to be less equal, less free, less human than others? Does humanity produce its own refuse, as we have heard it said in some countries?

During the International Year of the Child, we raised a similar question regarding children's rights. No doubt, it was necessary to reaffirm that children have inalienable rights. But was it not even more necessary to remind ourselves of the reasons for that? Is the notion of the child we wish to defend unequivocal and carefully argued? Do we know the child, do we respect

the child as such, for what children mean to humanity, today and tomorrow? Doesn't the everyday reality of children's lives in the Fourth World oblige us to ask that question, since our attitude and our behavior sometimes give the impression that for us such children, to take the extreme view, should perhaps not come into the world at all?

"Seeing how our children are treated, what respect do you have for them, what respect do you have for us as parents endowed with rights?" That was the question later put by Fourth World families at the seminar on "The Right of Families to Live in Dignity," organized at the Council of Europe in 1984. To go to the heart of the matter, what is our concept of the human being? That is the first question which people overcome by misery put to us. Furthermore, through their life experience, they challenge the concept which apparently enables us to ignore the indivisibility of their fundamental rights. We have seen how they demonstrate the interdependence of those rights. Yet, their anguish does not come so much from the mechanisms of that inter-dependence which imprison them in an existence virtually interwoven with unbearable deprivations. Their suffering, as we have said, stems far more from the indifference of the world around them which does not care to know or understand, although the fate of flesh and blood human beings is at stake. "Aren't we human beings too?"

That is an unsettling question for those who are prepared to listen, for it is dictated by a concept of the human person which the poor themselves refuse to relinquish. If we would only listen to them, they would remind us of what we appear to have forgotten : that «every man is a person », as our African friends put it. «Zo kwe zo,» and therefore human rights are to be defended not in the name of some principle of law but in the name of the human being.

We have seen how, against all probability, the refusal to be treated as something less than human springs up again and again in areas of extreme poverty. "It isn't fair"... How many times have we heard those words repeated like an age-old lamentation! "Father, is it fair that they refuse me housing?"... "Father, it's true that I can't read but is it fair that at school they don't want to hear my views about my children?"... "Father, is it fair that they put me in the orphanage, because our shack in the shanty town burned down and because my mother has no place to live?"... And far too often that question is followed by the heartrending observation: "We are not dogs, after all."

Is it not because we have forgotten that «every person is human beings » that we have left part of humanity without the means to demonstrate its dignity, its capacity for thought and its usefulness for others? In any case, it is in those terms that, as a priest, I am forced to put the question to myself and to my Church. My role is not first of all to find out whether or not the world is true to its declarations on human rights. My first duty is to do my share to ensure that our declarations and the way we apply them are in line with God's view of humanity. I need to ask myself if, for me, someone rendered unrecognizable by misery remains a full, intact human being, a child of God by birth. I must know if the way I try to uphold the rights of the poorest in my own life, in my priesthood, in my Church and in the world at large contributes to enlarging their liberty, their freedom to think, to believe, to act for themselves but also to act for the good of all. Are my life, my actions, my words conveying to them the message that they are free and that they are capable of choosing to be privileged agents of divine as well as of human justice?

A Christian cannot conceive the human being other than as free, unique, and indispensable to the common purpose. For a Christian, there can be no such thing as loosing your rights because you lack the resources to show yourself equal to others. A Christian's and the Church's first duty is not so much to defend human rights, much less to defend them in the name of the

law. Our duty is to defend the human being by restoring their rights to those whose very humanity has been called into question.

The Gospel tells us that God has the right to know that all His children are loved by their brothers and sisters. And this is where the essential question comes: Whom should I love before all others? To whom should I first offer that overflowing love which will restore his condition as an equal child of God? In the view of the Gospel, there is no doubt whatsoever that it is to that man, that woman, that child, that family in the deepest deprivation, lacking our education, our culture and therefore our way of worshipping God. Those are the people whom we must treat as another self. For it is in them that the rights of God are violated because we no longer recognize them as our brothers and sisters. Dare I add that all the declarations of human rights made in modern times seem to me to be an interpretation, a reflection of what Jesus Christ lived and continues to live to fully? The Gospel, perhaps better than any of our treaties and declarations, teaches us the indivisibility of rights in the name of that indivisibility of humanity itself, which at certain points in our history we called fraternity.

Moreover, couldn't all churches, all religions, all people of goodwill be unified around this mission of recognizing every person as a brother or sister, defending each person for the sake of his or her human condition, and restoring the rights to the poorest simply because they are human? Who would not adhere to the exhortation: do unto others as you would have them do unto you? Is fraternity not what all people seek and what all people equally need?

All people of goodwill are brought face to face with their God, with their convictions and beliefs, when they come into contact with extreme poverty. Who can accept that the father of a family should be unable to read and write or that a poor man, especially a young one, should be condemned to unemployment for lack of education? No one can admit that the mother of a large family should be without the resources to take real care of her health, that she should not have the money to feed her children herself. No one with a heart can allow children to be humiliated in school because of the poverty of their home; nor can one accept that whole families should be obliged to live as if happiness was withheld from them forever.

Here we touch moreover on another aspect of our concept of each person as the holder of responsibilities to which he aspires and which confirm his quality as a human being. Isn't it precisely in order to carry out these responsibilities with dignity that a person claims rights? The indivisibility of rights and responsibilities is also something that the poor of the world remind us of in practical, irrefutable terms. Surely it is by taking the poorest as partners and allies that we would have the best chance of advancing in our understanding of this indivisibility, not just in the life of each individual person but also in the overall existence of the whole of humanity. They truly demonstrate that it is not just the individual person but humanity as a whole which is indivisible, linked by one and the same destiny.

A new and unprecedented application of human rights would be achieved by taking the very poor as our partners. Beyond that, it would surely be a way of returning to the deepest sources of all our declarations which always remain only a provisional expression of humanity's neverending effort to understand itself better, a conceptual approach which is destined to go on developing. No people, whatever its culture or history, can be excluded from that endeavor.

RESTORING HUMAN RIGHTS TO THE VERY POOR: A UNIVERSAL MISSION

Experience in the field on every continent has taught us that trying to rediscover the sources of human dignity comes naturally to men and women of all cultures and beliefs. Wherever people are defenseless against the anguish and suffering of extreme poverty, wherever they are living in despair, unable to make themselves heard, there are other men and women prepared to put themselves at their service, ready to listen to their outcry, ready to respond to it and to make others listen too. Wherever there are entire populations gnawed by hunger, ashamed of their own ignorance, humiliated by unemployment, worn down by illness and weakened in body and soul by poverty, I have seen others join them in their struggle to obtain redress.

I am not talking here about government support, for it is precisely where that support is lacking, where official ties have been broken and people are excluded from both the national and international community, that fellow citizens rise to their feet, and local associations are created. These signs invariably appear when people have been excluded from our policies or budgets, when they only have one another to depend on. To disown human beings, families, a whole neighborhood or village in this way is intolerable, and when the public services have given up, ordinary people take the lead. This is a fact to which I have been witness since my childhood, in every country, rich or poor, and in every culture. When I ask people, be they Muslim, Christian, Jewish, Animist, Hindu or Buddhist, what makes them refuse to accept extreme poverty, their answers are not necessarily those dictated by their religion or precepts inculcated by tradition. Tradition throughout the world, generally regards alms or assistance as the proper response to those whose appearance has been altered beyond recognition by poverty.

The answers that I hear throughout the world are of a different nature: "Human beings weren't created to live in such abjection"... "That isn't what God would have wanted"... "I cannot accept that they should have to live in shame"... "As a woman, I cannot allow other women to live in such poverty." The mother of a Muslim family somewhere in Africa told me: "Have no fear, wherever people seem to have been completely abandoned, you will always find someone who comes to their aid." She added: "When there is no one else left, there will always be a nun."

Why this persistence on the part of individuals, when the community has abandoned people who seem to have lost all signs of humanity? "Because they are human beings"... This is what I was told by the state social services in Poland: "They have no jobs, they don't educate their children properly, and they take to drinking, but everybody can be saved." One may certainly question the severity of the measures taken by these services in order to "save" families living across the river in a run-down area of Warsaw, but at least we didn't hear the words "beyond redemption," so often used in other places. The idea that people could be "beyond redemption" has been expressed in richer countries, perhaps in desperation. For is it not in these countries that aid has been attempted in all of its most constructive forms, both public and private, without ever managing to eliminate extreme poverty? However, it is in these countries too, that when all other bridges have broken down we find fellow citizens, often families hardly less poor than those they try to help, who will not accept that society should condemn any household to such an inhuman existence.

Indeed, in our experience, it is mainly the poorest themselves who are that last rampart, refusing to see one another sink into despair. But there are always people in the neighborhood who will support this refusal. These efforts, it's true, usually meet with little success, for how can

abject poverty be combated simply by personal goodwill? What does count, however, is the idea that poverty “isn’t fair,” that people weren’t created to be dehumanized in such a way. The universal feature of poverty is that people are deprived of the responsibilities and the fundamental rights usually acknowledged in their particular culture. And in every culture, on every continent, there are men and women who find it both abnormal and inhuman that entire segments of society remain defenseless against such extreme poverty, or even worse, that they should be excluded because they live in such deprivation. There are people everywhere who echo the feeling that the poorest have about themselves: “It’s not fair, for I’m a human being too.”

This feeling explains the birth in the 1960’s of what has become the “Permanent Forum on Extreme Poverty,” founded by the ATD Fourth World Movement. It brings together people from all over the world, allowing them to learn from each other’s experiences. Nobody gives lectures or expounds theories. Each member tries, within the framework of his culture, his individual situation and his religious convictions, to support children, young people or families living in extreme poverty in his own country. People acting individually, soon are no longer alone. In the Forum they discover ways of establishing small non-governmental organizations within the community they are trying to serve. That, too, is significant. We are not dealing with exceptional people here, but with ordinary citizens, capable of bringing together others who share their views as to what constitutes a human being.

One may certainly ask in what way this approach relates to human rights as we know them in our democracies. It is an approach which is making its way, quietly no doubt, and without so far provoking any spectacular changes in the national or international communities. Yet, UNESCO, UNICEF, the World Bank and the European Commission are represented at all the meetings where these defenders of humanity have a real voice. That does not mean that these major bodies are all at once automatically in a position to reach the poorest and change their situation. Yet they are all involved in a process which I believe is essential for real progress in the field of human rights. For it signifies a return to the source of all rights, a rediscovery of mankind, in particular of people deprived of the means to show that they too are human and capable of partnership in the context of the culture of their time and place.

It is true that in the Western countries we tend to regret the often limited importance attached to declarations and treaties in other parts of the world; but have we not been rather hasty in our desire to see all nations adhere to them, no matter what their history or their culture? Have we forgotten the time and experience that have been required in our own countries to build up nations sufficiently united to create democracies and thus embark on establishing equality and liberty for all? Was it wise to believe that only economic reasons could justify certain denials of human rights elsewhere, just as we take the view that only economic reasons could explain obvious failures to achieve full human rights in our countries? Could not the discovery that extreme poverty denies all rights, because it denies the human person, be used as an opportunity to take up the ideal of inalienable rights at its very source again, through co-operation between rich and poor nations and between all cultures?

Is this not the chance the very poor offer us to help re-focus all our struggles and to ask ourselves the real questions once again? They bring it home to us that the question is not what economic resources are available for the implementation of our declarations, but whether we believe that every person is worthy of assuming responsibilities for the good of others. That brings us to the issue of a person’s right to share the responsibilities and the rights which the society he or she lives in confers on most of its members. Then the question of inalienable rights for all clearly arises. However, it is only at the end of an examination of the lives of the

poorest that human rights can be fully recognized. Is that not an approach worth adopting, since history tells us that imposing human rights as a prerequisite poses a real problem in many cultures throughout the world?

This was the line of reflection followed at a seminar of the Forum meeting at UNESCO in 1987. The delegates underlined, in the very first place, the right of all people, in particular the very poor, to be recognized and to have proof that they are recognized as human beings, the right to have others join them to show fraternity by sharing their life and their struggle. This is what we call “human beings investing in humanity”: “If you have lost faith because you have experienced so much neglect, I will come to your side and show you that you are my brother, my sister, worthy of confidence and responsibility.”

It would seem that no culture can truly deny this investment by committed men and women in others whose confidence in their own abilities, in their identity and in the support of people around them has been shattered by extreme poverty. The extreme poverty which I myself have witnessed throughout my entire life is a slow and painful progression, where confidence in oneself and in people in general is ever more undermined, day by day. Every-where, North and South, the very poor are people with a long history of erosion of their self-confidence and their expectations of others, a history in which hopes are dashed, ever more suppressed with each passing year. Over the years, I have seen this experience gradually better understood all over the world.

Everyone can understand that if the humanity of the poorest is to be redeemed, the ultimate price must be in terms of our own human investment. Whoever believes in humanity can agree that the poorest have an absolute right to call on others to come personally to their aid. “Humanity is a human being’s own best cure,” as our friends in Africa would say. In the light of this perspective, all people, whatever their philosophies and beliefs, have a vocation and a mission to help the very poor. Could not such an awareness give new vigor and direction to our reflection and experimentation with regard to human rights? On this basis, rich and poor from the same country, and rich and poor people among all nations, would have the chance to meet on a more equal footing, and to discover the common heritage which justifies the great international declarations and conventions, and which alone can ensure genuine, common implementation of them. It is not so much education about human rights that the world needs but rather a joint inquiry into what makes for the indivisibility of human beings not only as individuals, but also as a body, necessarily united and jointly responsible for the human rights they grant one another.

For my part, I can say, in conclusion, that the poor have taught me an invaluable lesson about this comprehensive indivisibility. First of all, they taught me that we will not get anywhere in improving our understanding of extreme poverty by dividing it up along geographical lines.

When we allow them to speak for themselves, they are much more concerned to tell us what unites them, namely the impossibility of being proud of their identity, of their history, the ban on belonging to any group which is not negative or even shameful. On every continent, they tell us that it is impossible for them to live as equals with other people, as long as these people continue to be unaware of who they are. The inexorable concentration of deprivations which makes life as a person and as a family impossible is, to my mind, the clearest indication of the indivisibility of the fundamental rights that must be attributed to them if we want them to be truly free.

More important still: people living in extreme poverty in all countries express their conviction that living as a person, as a brother or sister, as a citizen implies being able to take on one's responsibilities. For them, fundamental rights have their true meaning and are truly achieved only when they enable people to be responsible beings, that is to say, workers re-cognized as such, parents capable of rearing their children, useful members of a community, men and women playing their part in the destiny of their country. The poorest teach us not only about the indivisibility of rights and responsibilities but also of the co-responsibility between individuals and between peoples which this indivisibility signifies. For the poorest in all countries, everyone has a personal share in the single mission of building a national and international community "where our children can live," "where people would go hand-in-hand"... , a mission which is conceivable in the light of every one of the faiths and beliefs represented in the United Nations.

Could it not be that, in the end, the future of human rights will depend on the poorest and the mission they wish to take on with us? To achieve these rights, a new alliance and new partners are offered to us. What a gift it would be to the world, if we were willing to accept them!