

GOD'S RIGHTS, HUMAN RIGHTS

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A man, downtrodden by extreme poverty once said to me, *"We owe everything to God. He gives us so many things."* Why did I think of these words while considering the theme "The Church and the Fourth World?" Because in our day and age we can no longer speak of the Fourth World and in consequence of extreme poverty, without speaking of Human Rights. Now to talk of Human Rights in the Church among believers is of necessity to speak of God. God, who by instituting a covenant between himself and his people, also lays the foundations of the relationships between all of his children.

For this reason I would like to speak about God and what we owe him before speaking of what people owe to each other. We soon discover that God bases his covenant with his people on a promise, *"I will lead you out of captivity; I will gather you from among the nations."* Christ revived this promise when he said, *"There will be great calamities, but do not be afraid."* The Church, for its part, fulfils its mission to continually proclaim the same promise, *"I will lead you out, do not be afraid,"* when it affirms that its priority is to reach out to the poorest, to welcome and serve them.

The poorest take heart from this promise; they pray to the Lord, like a woman who, one morning, addressed herself to God, *"God, yesterday was an awful day. You forgot me. You have so many things to do, but I know you never lose sight of me."* The poorest also know that they can count on Jesus, *"My suffering is no big deal,"* said Mr. Guerrin who lived in temporary housing, *"Look at him,"* he repeated, directing my attention to the crucifix fixed to the wall of his overcrowded apartment, *"The cross must have been far worse for him; and he did it for us."*

The testimonies of the poorest, their confidence in God and their wonderful prayers fill the pages of the Church's history, even if we do not always understand them. Prayers like this, *"Lord, it was the priest who gave me my bread. Lord, make him live a long time; what would I do without him?"* I also recall this answer from 12-year-old Jacqueline to my question, *"What is charity?"* *"Charity,"* she said, *"is when you have nothing left to give, and Jesus tells you: give your heart".* The poor know and they remind us that it is not possible to remove from the Gospel the Church's commitment to the most unwanted people. The Church does what Jesus wishes it to do. And Jesus himself affirms and fulfils the will of God.

What then constitutes God's promise? What is it? Throughout history, it is that all people should be recognized as God's children and treated as such. Clearly this means that today, as in the past, the Church has been called to remind people that the poorest and most reviled people have the right to be treated with dignity as God's

children. The Church's mission is to remind people that the inalienable dignity of the poorest as God's children must be recognized. What is more, this means that the Church is faithful to this mission only if it tirelessly reminds people that all of God's children must have the means to live and to express this dignity.

The most disadvantaged members of society have reminded us of the unbreakable bond between the Scriptures and the preferential preoccupation of the Church for the poorest; this binds all people to God and to Christ. Whether they are aware of it, whether they accept it or not, all people are bound to God and I would say "allies of God" in their struggle for the dignity of the poorest, which is nothing less than the realization of Human Rights.

I would like to take a closer look at this extraordinary alliance between God, Jesus his son, and mankind, towards the fulfillment of Human Rights for everyone and above all for the poor.

THE GOD'S RIGHTS

At the heart of the Old Testament is the fact that God asserts his right upon Israel, his people, *"I have called you by your name; you are my people."* At the same time, as a counterpart, he exhorts his people to have confidence in him and to turn to him in times of distress, *"Because you are precious in my eyes,"* he says *"and because I appreciate and I love you"*.

Thus the right of God over his people is based on the love that he bears for them. He bases it on the fact that he has a responsibility towards them. In the Old Testament, Isaiah says, *"So that his people be not plundered and stripped without restitution, chained up in dungeons and prisons without relief, God, in his justice, wants to publish a wonderful and magnificent law."*

The first commandment of this Law is, *"You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your spirit and with all your strength."* Therefore, the first demand, the first right of God upon his people is that they love him above all creatures. It is a disconcerting right, different from all the rights human beings invent. The Law which creates the covenant must be applied, but this must be done by love and by free choice. There is a right and there is a law, but there is also this strange freedom to choose to apply this law to the love of God. This reminds me of a family man who was in tears when he told me how ungrateful his children were towards their parents, *"We never cease to think of them, to do everything that we can for them, and we ask nothing in return except that they love us"*.

"We owe everything to God," said a friend of mine who lived in extreme poverty, *"He has done so many things for us"*. God, like the man with ungrateful children, asks nothing in return except to be loved.

The Gospel, however, reminds us that the commandment to love is twofold. God is love and we must love him above all else; but God also requires that we love our neighbor as ourselves. He reminds us that the way in which we treat our neighbor matters to him, that he has responsibilities towards them, and that he loves them like

all of his children. In short, God tells us that he has the right to expect that all his children are loved by their brothers and sisters.

Now, we are confronted by this basic question: Who is my neighbor? Who must I love above all things? Jesus' answer is clear, "*A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho and he fell into the hands of robbers*". From among those who noticed him, only a Samaritan helped him and took him in hand. Thus, for Jesus, the neighbor is the person who in every respect is an outsider. It is the person to whom we must get close even when we have nothing in common with them. Our neighbor is the family in the greatest distress, which has neither our education, nor our culture, nor our manner of worshipping God. A family so poor that it has nothing in common with other families who also seem poor. We must make this father, mother and child part of ourselves. It is through them that we commit ourselves to God. It is through this father, this mother and this child that the Right of God is violated, because we have not recognized them first of all in their dignity as God's children, and consequently as our brothers and sisters.

HUMAN RIGHTS

In the Gospel, Human Rights are the expression of the Right of God. We might say that God gave himself responsibilities first. Then he does the same for his children. First of all he pronounces them responsible and then he gives them the freedom to be responsible. Love God with all your strength; love your neighbor as yourself. Love first of all, believe, trust, and love. Afterwards you can do what you wish. As St. Augustine said, "*Love and do what you will.*"

The families of the Fourth World understand this better than anyone. For them, the hardest and most unacceptable thing is to be deprived of their responsibilities. "*I pray to God but I cannot go to church,*" said the mother of a family in a poor housing complex near Paris, "*Can you see me in church? I pray, but only in the house when the children aren't there. How on earth can you pray in the middle of that racket?*" In effect, the poorest teach us that the responsibility for loving is a right for all, a right that cannot be bypassed. It is a right which the poorest repeatedly demand: "*We want to be useful, to work rather than continually receive help*". I am thinking of the words of a 70-year-old man who lived in an emergency housing complex in Caen, "*We are not asking for rights, we just want to work.*" This man is demanding a job, not as a right to make a living, but as a right to be someone.

In their pursuit of responsibilities, families of the Fourth World follow Jesus Christ who said to his disciples, "*The son of man did not come to be served but to serve and to give his life as a ransom for the multitude.*" A humble woman often used to say to me, "*Always look at the people worse off than yourself.*" In this one sentence, this mother, who was so overwhelmed by her poverty, encapsulated the meaning of Human Rights. She also encapsulated the priorities that need to be set; about the priorities God established and proclaimed throughout the Gospel through the life of Jesus himself. Christ's choice to live through giving priority to the poorest.

GOD ESTABLISHED THE PRIORITY TO THE POOREST.

AND JESUS CONFIRMED IT

Throughout human history, God himself has established a priority to the poorest. God has always demanded of his people that they honor and protect the poorest amongst his children and respect them. But his people did not listen to Him.

In the past, the Jewish people did what we ourselves are doing today. They created a society where some people had knowledge, wealth, and power, while others learned little, gained little, and had nothing to say. These people lived in poverty. However, below them there were the poorest: despised, rejected, and counted for nothing.

In Israel there were slaves, both Gentiles and Jews. However, the Law of Moses permitted that Jewish slaves be set free after six years of servitude. But there was worse than slavery, for, in the name of religion, the Jewish people established a worse condition of servitude, without recourse, without possible redemption. These people, who had no means of appeal, were the men and women who were declared impure because of their trade or their infirmity. Such were the shepherds looking after the flocks of their masters, those possessed by demons, the lepers, and the tax collectors. All such people were judged irredeemable just as those who today are living on what they can recover from trash bins or rubbish dumps. In the same way, other people are judged as undesirables in our cities: families who have not learned to live in modern apartments and families who never have the means to pay their rent. Similarly, they are regarded as untouchables, like these mothers who because of extreme poverty have been forced into prostitution in the ports of big European cities in order to feed their children.

Thus, in Israel, many of God's children were despised, often from father to son. But in worse conditions still were the homeless people and beggars who sometimes formed gangs of criminals in Jerusalem, like the good and the bad thieves: "*the dregs of the population*," as described by the historian Josephus; "*society's refuse*," as we might say today.

So what became of God's love for the poorest? How could the poorest still love God when it was in the name of religion that they were despised? How could they love their neighbor, excluded as they were from the rest of the people? The Right of God to be loved and to see all of his children equally respected and loved was rendered null and void. Through humiliation and disenfranchisement, and by denying them responsibilities, rights, or freedom, the Jewish people denied the Right of God. Through the poorest people in Israel, just as through the families of the Fourth World today, we see that we cannot talk about people without talking about God. To humiliate a person is to humiliate God.

It was to put an end to this intolerable humiliation of the poorest and of himself that God caused his son to be born. He caused him to be born where the children of unclean parents were born, whether they were shepherds, bandits, or the destitute roaming about the roads. In his son, God invested all that he could offer that was most precious; his son, the savior of the world. He invested his own son where

people were the most humiliated. Through him, God himself assumed the condition of the outcast; he himself became an outcast. He did so in order that no one could ever question his will that all people be recognized as his children and that they receive the rights that ensue.

In this way God not only proclaims, but re-establishes his justice. He reminds people that they have to invest the most precious thing they own, their whole self, amongst the poorest. This is what Jesus did. He shared his divine and his human nature amongst the poorest. This is the very mystery of the Mass which we celebrate every day. Jesus takes things upon himself; he lives out before our eyes the justice he rendered first of all to the most unwanted people.

JESUS AND HUMAN RIGHTS.

Through his temptation in the desert and the life that he led subsequently, Jesus constantly shed light on the Right of God. By his person and his life he showed that the Right of God and Human Rights should be seen as a whole. Following the answer of Jesus to the temptations, *"You will love the Lord and no other God but him alone,"* Luke, in his Gospel, reveals the mission of Jesus when he says, *"The spirit of the Lord is upon me, for he has anointed me to preach the good news to the poor, to console those who are heartbroken, to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to free those who are oppressed, and to proclaim the favorable year of the Lord"*.

For Jesus, God has a right to trust and obedience, and this right cannot be disassociated from the right of the poor, the excluded and the dispossessed to be healed and to render thanks to God. The Right of God is one with the right of those who are rejected as unclean because of their infirmities to hear the words, *"You are saved"*.

Jesus' complicity with the poorest restored their true identity as children of God and confirmed their free-will. The direct consequence was his acceptance to endure an ignominious death like a highway robber. Jesus did far more than restore their rights. He becomes the person deprived of his rights to whom the poor will restore those rights in turn. It is through Jesus, by what he does and perhaps above all by what the poorest do to him, that we learn what fundamental Human Rights are:

- The right to God-given identity: the right to be recognized God and man because of the Resurrection. *"Rabbunni,"* said Mary Magdalene, the woman possessed, possibly a prostitute, and in either case excluded, *"I have seen the Lord, the crucified Lord is alive."*

- The right to trust: this right which God demands for himself. This right, the poor so cruelly lack, they give it to Jesus wholeheartedly, *"Lord if you wish it, you can heal me."*

- The right to equal respect: it is shown by the woman who gives all her money, all her savings and without doubt all she has, to buy the precious oil to pour on this

man's feet. This man whom the powerful despised, harried, pursued, and scrutinized, in the same way, alas, as the poorest are so often treated today.

Jesus was thirsty and the Samaritan woman gave him water. Jesus was hungry and the disciples made every effort to feed him. Jesus was without shelter; he had nowhere to lay his head and all sorts of people welcomed him. Have we ever understood the truth of these words, *"Then the King will say to those on his right hand: Come you, the blessed of my Father; inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world. For I was hungry and you gave me food; I was thirsty and you gave me drink; I was a stranger and you welcomed me; I was naked and you clothed me; I was sick and you visited me; I was in prison and you came to me?"*

Have we really understood the significance of these words? When Christ says, *"I am,"* he confirms that the Right of God and Human Rights are one and the same. In short they are indivisible.

To do something to the least person is to do it to Jesus himself. Jesus did not say this as a metaphor, an analogy, or as a way of saying that he is on their side. No, Jesus isn't playing games; he is serious. Jesus was and remains, as the Eucharist reminds us, the most humiliated and downtrodden person. It is for him then, that people, and above all the poorest, act to restore honor, trust, and all Human Rights.

Dare I say that all of the declarations of Human Rights made in modern history are merely interpretations, reflections, and an attempt to formulate or to clarify what Jesus lived and continues to live in all fullness? Jesus, who is always with the poor, himself the poorest, the Fourth World of our own time. Let's try to see what the church of tomorrow will retain of this in its daily practice.

THE CHURCH AND THE FOURTH WORLD

As a priest, families of the Fourth World taught me, day after day, that Jesus Christ is justice, and that Jesus arouses justice around him. Families in poverty often say, *"It is not right the way we are treated. For what did Jesus die?"* And not long ago, a man told me, *"We keep putting him on the cross."*

It was also the poorest who revealed to me how much they trust the Church. For some it is the priests, for others it is the religious sisters who defended them and who were good to them. Others talked of lay people who took notice of their hardship and got involved. Thus, each generation of very poor people recalls in one way or another the Church's struggle for justice, through such people as Monsignor Cardijn, Vincent de Paul, Don Bosco, Father Pire, Abbé Pierre, Mother Teresa and others. If ever the Church was tempted to forget its mission as defender of the poorest, the injustice they are subjected to and their profound suffering would very quickly remind it of its role.

In fact, all people of good will are reminded of God's ways whenever they come across extreme poverty. Who indeed, can meet a family from the Fourth World without seeking to set it free? Who can possibly accept that the father of a family is incapable of reading and writing? Who can accept that a poor man, above all if he is

young, can be condemned to unemployment because of his lack of education? No one can accept that a mother of a large family cannot take care of her own health, that she has no money to feed her children and herself. No one with any feelings can allow children to be humiliated at school because of the family's poverty at home, or that whole families are obliged to live as if they are forever forbidden to be happy.

Consciously or not, the poorest always expect more from people of faith and from the church. For them too, the violations of their rights are violations of the Right of God. Once at a meeting in London, the mother of a family said to me *"Father, you tell us that we are the victims of injustice, you're right; but you never tell us this is also God's concern. As far as I know, he is our father."* This woman reminded me that it is through the mission received from Christ that believers must be defenders of Human Rights, because God is directly affected, dare I say personally, by the wrongs done to his children.

This was forcefully brought home to me when a woman in deep poverty, a mother of two children, came to see me one day, *"Father,"* she said crying, *"They have offended God."* *"Calm down what are you talking about?"* I said. *"They made me have an abortion at the hospital"*. This woman carried within herself a particular sensibility. For her, it was above all God who had been gravely offended. She reminded me, a priest, that with every injustice, it is Christ who continues to be subjected to humiliation and distrust. And the Church, by its rejection of extreme poverty, denounces the violation of God's right to be loved and the rights of his children to be able to love him.

This is why the Church, driven by a sure instinct, has never ceased to respond to the cry of the very poor. Over the centuries, the church has tried to gather believers around the poorest families. In the past, it created hospitals and schools. Today, it upholds the right of the poorest to love and be loved through community projects in disadvantaged areas.

In a general sense, today's Church continues to proclaim that every child of God has the right to sufficient resources to build a life, that every family should have a decent roof over its head, and that every worker must be respected and be able to find a job. Long before politicians, the Church said that we had to give people control over their own intellect, that it is unacceptable that extreme poverty should cause people to say, as I have so often heard *"You know, we are stupid."*

In a word, the Church today continues to bring people together around the poorest. This was Monsignor Cardijn's struggle. Thanks to the Church, he learned that all the gold in the world has little value compared to one human being. An inheritor of the church's struggle for justice, he said that the world created by the labor of people is at the service of the spirit, and that each young person should feel free from the constraints of material things, machinery, and money.

This Church which walks the way of extreme poverty at the Lord's command and which never abandons the downtrodden and humiliated, this Church deserves our trust. Through this Church, Jesus reiterates to the priests and to members of religious orders that they are at his service by being at the service of the poorest, that

they are nothing else than servants of justice and of the liberation of the poorest, *"What you do to the least of my brothers, you do it to me."*

You yourselves will always be part of this Church which has an urgent mission to reach out to those who suffer the most, those who are no longer able to love, and who cry out to me, *"If God really existed, it would be even worse because I would have to hate him."*

Truly, by aligning itself with the Fourth World, the Church compromises itself. When Monsignor Cardijn joined the workers in very poor areas, he compromised himself in the eyes of many believers who became indignant that these poor workers were not fit company for a young priest. Is it not the same today for the Fourth World? To become involved with these families is not considered by many to be a true ministry. People tell us that it's social work. Is it not utopian to be a priest committed to ending extreme poverty? Didn't even Christ himself say, *"You will always have the poor with you?"*

But to compromise oneself in this way with those who are considered insignificant, with the scorned and the violent, is to embrace the fate of Christ. It is to be brought into disrepute and to lose your status as he did. Even the poorest will mistrust you. In the shanty towns of the 1960's, certain families, a little less poor than the rest, used to say to me, *"Father these people don't belong to your world; you do yourself a disservice by going to their houses."* Every priest, every active Christian in this way has to experience rejection. They have to experience hunger, the uselessness of their efforts, failure, and being brushed aside. This is the price that Jesus paid, but it is also the secret to gaining the trust of the poorest.

In the camp at Noisy-le-Grand, the mother of a family was amazed and astonished one day that I did not have a penny to give her, *"Come and see this priest; he hasn't got a penny to his name."* If we all took up the thread of Monsignor Cardijn's life story, never would a woman from the Fourth World be astonished by the poverty of the priests and the laity. Then, like the Lord, the Church will seek justice. Then it will challenge the world and compel it to be just.

The alliance of the Church and the Fourth World builds itself inevitably on the age-old alliance between the Church and poverty, and for some people between the Church and extreme poverty. It is on this alliance that the Kingdom is founded on earth.

CONCLUSION – THE CHURCH: ETERNAL SERVANT AND PAUPER

Only a servant Church can name God and say that God is the source, the basis of Human Rights. Only a Church that is poor can name a human being to the completeness of being a child of God. Only the Church can proclaim that God has chosen the poorest as the principal architects of the Kingdom. This is the fusion of the Right of God and Human Rights, forever indivisible. The Church, like Jesus, is Human Rights in action, seeking to create a world where humanity becomes more accomplished. It is up to us to see that no poor person, denied of their rights, is prevented from becoming an architect of the Kingdom of God. It is up to us to serve

the poorest, so that the Church can truly be the Church, servant and pauper as Jesus wished.

In this way the poorest will at last participate in a world where the God's Rights will be recognized and inherently associated with Human Rights. Thus we will live in a world where God's Rights and Human Rights will together ensure that these rights are never again denied to the poorest of people.