

International Joseph Wresinski Center

The Violence Done to the Poor

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The violence of indifference and contempt

Only people crushed under the weight of the violence of their fellow citizens are totally miserable. They are mercilessly targeted by contempt or indifference against which they cannot protect themselves.

They can only withdraw, leaving behind beaten paths. Then they have to blot themselves out, become the forgotten ones of emergency housing settlements, slums, and shanty-towns. They are outcasts.

The violence of contempt and indifference causes chronic poverty, since it inevitably leads to exclusion, to the rejection of one human being by other human beings. It ensnares the poor in mechanisms that grind them to bits and destroy them. It turns them into a disenfranchised people.

The constant deprivation of communion with others which fills life with light and security condemns their minds to darkness, imprisons their hearts in turmoil, anguish, and mistrust, breaking their spirits.

Violence in the name of order, reason, and justice

Neither the dispossessed, nor the wealthy, are necessarily aware of the violence that presses down on the world of persistent poverty. It is often hidden behind the mask of order, reason, and even justice.

Isn't it in the name of moral order that we pry into their fragile love lives, shaking them up, sometimes belittling them, always judging them, instead of turning them into the starting point of family advancement? Still, even if they match neither our moral standards nor our laws, their love lives are doubtlessly the only hope they still have for trust and for progress towards a more complete life.

Shanty-towns could have been a bridge leading a destitute people towards a fairer society. In the name of social order, we have turned them into living hell, making their lives infernal, under the pretext of preventing families from putting down roots and staying there. Our haste in enforcing order makes us forget that they are human beings. The more their lives are insecure and the less they own, the more people cling to their belongings for fear of losing them. They will not readily exchange what little they have for something they can neither know nor understand.

Isn't it also our sense of "reason" that convinces us to take freedom away from the disinherited? Don't we know better than they do what they need? Why confront them with real choices which they wouldn't know how to make? So we even go so far as to tell them where they are going to live. Then we accuse them of not taking any initiatives or showing any ambition, adding; "They don't want to get ahead." How could they get ahead, if they've never been able to put their own reasoning to good use?

In the name of a kind of justice, we even usurp the father's prerogatives; we take over for him in front of his own children. We claim that he does not shoulder his responsibilities, and we condemn him. So he can never really become a father, fully responsible for his family and defending its rights.

By casting aside all they do, by belittling all they endeavor, by stripping them of most of their possessions, we turn them into people under attack. Since they find no redress that complies with our laws; their suffering pushes them to steal and to harm others. So, in the name of justice, we put them in prison. When they are released, how are they still supposed to respect our justice?

Our order, our reason, and our justice turn against them, thereby setting up for them a peculiar order that plunges them into disorder, folly, and injustice.

A violent order engenders an order of chaos and of violence

Inside this order, that seems reasonable and fair to us, poor people settle down, as if they were in a normal situation. They respect the laws and their obligations. Already crushed, they behave accordingly, but the violence of this order gets under their skin. The law that they endure becomes the one that they will make others endure, and the obligations that are imposed on them, they will impose on those close to them and on their surroundings.

However, poor people are not violent following the model of the order that is imposed on them. They are neither coherent, nor logical. They will be driven by a reflex at once blind, clumsy and boisterous, and their violence will apparently be unfocused. A man beats his wife, insults his boss, threatens the worker in the unemployment office, and kicks his friends out... He is not only a violent person; he's a wild one. He picks fights with his neighbors; he swears at charitable ladies who are cluttering up his life and who, behind the mask of their sugary manners, appear to be conduits of the biting and implacable violence he is enduring.

So anyone who is not poor flees these lunatics, feeling themselves lucky to get away so easily. They escape from these dangerous maniacs who deserve what they get. There's no point; there will never be anything you can do with them.

A society that claims to be grounded on reason and the respect of order cannot conceive of such a way of communicating. Churches will think that they are playing it smart by telling them about their plans only with caution or condescension.

This is how the situation of the disenfranchised in our so-called “affluent society” has become the most tragic ever known by mankind throughout history. Never so much as right now have the utterly destitute been such stunted and mutilated human beings, deprived of their freedom, their rights, their powers, their honor and their love. Human beings are made to bear total violence in the name of reason, justice and the established order.

The dispossessed are not a hateful people

What kind of human beings then are people who are treated like this, who are known only through the prism of vice, or of sin, or even of madness? Who are these human beings whose facial features are ravaged and who, furthermore, are recognized like this: “Doesn’t every society have its own refuse? Furthermore, it needs something it can throw away.”

Condemned to silence as befits those who are the shame of the community, deprived of those basic means of expression which are speech and intelligence, they cry out to us through their filth, through the smell of chronic poverty, and through their chaotic and violent life style.

Are they crying out about vengeance, robbery, rape, or restitution? Are their intentions really the opposite of ours?

In fact, they are neither waste, nor dangerous, nor filled with hate towards those who oppress them. Behind the broken windows of their homes, the jagged boards of their cabins, the shameful dark cavern of their Quonset huts, in daily searches for work, for a friend, for an outstretched hand, for a God to believe in, they bear the ceaseless violence of pointless waiting. And if they sometimes clench their fists, it’s not because they are holding hatred inside them, it’s because in their disarray they have no one to wait for; they do not find a strong, warm hand of Jesus Christ to squeeze. Their violence is born of the desperation caused by feeling unworthy, not of the conviction of their own rights and of the determination to claim them by attacking us.

We are always shutting the doors of our churches tighter

Yet this violence forever calls for violence, and our reaction to the unconscious and blind violence of the powerless is one of repulsion, of contempt, of ever stronger rejection; it is banishment from the common heritage and imprisonment in emergency housing shelters. Our reaction is policemen, patrol cars, bulldozers that, by leveling shanty-towns, destroy that caricature of private property belonging to the marginalized: some pieces of wood, some scraps of sheet metal or tar paper, a few old crates found amidst the trash of an open-air market...

Our reaction is to raise even higher the fortified walls around our own interests, our own privileges, our own institutions, and to shut more tightly the half-opened doors of

our places of worship. Girded with security, we will fall asleep peacefully and quietly, still ignoring people close to us, our own brothers and sisters.

Not refuse, but victims, they will remain invisible in sordid emergency housing, rented hotel rooms, and shanty-towns. We do not want to know the reality of their lives, and the more we lock ourselves inside our fortresses, the less we will be able to grasp this reality. They have become foreigners to us, those whose suffering we consider to be justifiable. Agreeing to listen to them would mean taking the risk of losing everything, because they will not be satisfied with bits and pieces; they will want to take it all, grab everything and destroy it all. We are well aware of the importance of the danger we will have to face; we must avoid it at all costs. Even at the cost of inhumanity.

We are all responsible for these brutal reactions, even those among us who are involved in actions to fight against poverty. It is our fault because we are too likely to talk about chronic poverty as an afterthought, a slight oversight, a small accident in the history of humanity marching forward. And we often propose incomplete answers and makeshift solutions. Above all, this tinkering must not hinder the creation of the new world towards which we are heading, made of new Towers of Babel and new Columns of Hercules.

Men and women are being lost while we conquer outer space

Without wanting to admit it, we also feel that what matters is not the risk of losing human beings, but that of slowing down other people's progress: building planes, opening factories, landing on planets make up the real history of our time. And we want to be part of this history and of this epoch. So, wanting to eradicate extreme poverty is not really that vital; it's the praiseworthy endeavor of a handful of nice people who are slightly eccentric or utopian. "It's a special calling," people sometimes tell us indulgently, "a special charisma." But it's not essential; it's surely not worth getting too involved or "ruining" one's life.

This shows that we have misunderstood this insidious and constant violence inflicted on the poor and which leads to men and women being lost while we conquer outer space. We have not understood that the awkward violence of the dispossessed, far from being an historical accident, challenges an entire society able to race to the stars while destroying human beings.

The violence of love

If it is true that violence calls for violence, is there only one kind; that of exclusion, of rifles shoved against the chests of the very poor?

In our opinion, there is another kind that is infinitely more powerful. It is rooted in the very core of the human beings that we are. It draws life from our hearts, from the best that we are, from our wishes for joy and for abundant peace to share. It draws life from our encounter with a charitable God, with our ideal of justice.

This is the kind of violence that triggers the real revolutions, at once deep-seated and definitive, and the resurrections which restore life, respect, honor, glory and happiness to all human beings, rich or poor. It is to this kind of violence, that of love that we are all destined, whether we like it or not, merely because we are truly human beings and because we have become aware that no other human being can ever be a stranger or an enemy to us.

This is also the destiny of the dispossessed. If we knew them even a little, we would realize that they are asking for nothing else from us than to be human beings and that they are wishing for nothing else. They are asking us that everyone be recognized and treated like human beings.

They are asking for nothing else than this, that schools develop and refine their children's minds, that churches be a path towards the communion of all human beings with the God they believe in, that society be fair and honest, that technology and the economy help us to share the earth's resources.

Just like us, the dispossessed are calling for the creation of a new world. The meaning of their struggle is also to change the structures of society in such a way that honor, justice, love, and truth become the groundwork on which all human beings, including themselves, obtain the totality of their rights: full powers to think, to understand, to love, to act, and to pray. If the most disadvantaged challenge us, if they ask and force us to ask questions, it is not because they want us to slow down our pace, but on the contrary they are compelling us to go faster and farther, to see with an infinitely grander vision, and to be more ambitious than we are. They are leading us into a real whirlpool of overall re-evaluation of humanity.

Will the oppressed become the oppressors?

Of course, we could conceive of another type of revolution, of a more classic nature in world history, which would consist in organizing the poor in such a way that they could seize power from the rich and take their place. But who then could guarantee that today's downtrodden, once they've become the wealthy of tomorrow, would be better than the rich of today? Who can tell us whether Lazarus, once seated at the table of the wealthy, would not pursue them so as to cast them out in turn; who can assure us that, once he became mighty, he would not organize violence and destruction to his own ends? Shouldn't we expect that from today's poor will emerge tyrants who will oppress the rich once they've been stripped of their power? How can we prevent justice for all, honor and prayer for all, from once again being turned by yesterday's underdogs elevated to power into the injustice, the lies, the hatred and the war of tomorrow's world?

The current situation of the marginalized, the necessary transformation of the world on their behalf, must not make us forget this new danger: that the disinherited in turn will seek to oppress and to destroy human beings. Isn't the source of this certain danger that the poor see today's powerful living in affluence and using their resources to dominate and to crush others? If one day the downtrodden took their place, why would they not be

tempted to do what they've seen others doing and to recreate the type of society they know, grounded on violence?

But what if, while looking at the wealthy today, they found among them, human beings imbued with humanity, respectful of all their brothers, bountiful, working in real and concrete ways to shape a new world based on justice, love, truth and peace? What if they found among the wealthy today human beings obsessed with the dignity of their fellow creatures? There would be the hope that they would choose them as models rather than the others, choose to co-operate with them in the creation of the world.

Love engenders love

The future will really be shaped by us personally, whether we build it with the poor or whether they supplant us one day to build it without us. If there is to be a world without oppression, the world of tomorrow requires us to live out the reality of Christ's words; "The kingdom suffers violence." But the violence we are talking about is one done to ourselves, the violence of ridding ourselves of our pride, of our spirit of domination; one of freely giving up the resources that we will contribute to the achievement of brotherhood, of truth, and of peace.

If the poor saw us really living like poor people, they would notice us, take us as models, and we would turn that poverty into the truth required and practiced by Christ. For Jesus, crucified on Golgotha, poverty is a life-long experience and requirement, and one cannot be truly poor in any other way than the one he has chosen. If we do not agree to pay the price that Christ himself has set for us, there can be no fairer, truer, and more fraternal future. That is true for all of us who challenge today's world of affluence. Reaching tomorrow's world will require our openness to the call for love rising from the earth. It will require our surrendering belongings. Its foundations will be fitting together and sharing what has been given to us so that everything can be useful to everyone and to their happiness.

But even if we let go of what we hold, this will not be accepted and recognized as a reference point unless we are constantly freeing ourselves of our possessions, unless our ideal is not only to always draw closer to the poorest but also to identify with everything that within them is truth, love, and justice, thereby showing our support for their cause and loving it so much that it becomes completely our own until it is accomplished.

Then, the dispossessed, having found in us human beings to emulate and not to strike down, will work whole-heartedly with us to shape a world of justice, a world of truth, a world of love and peace. And if, on this earth, there is still any violence, it will be the violence of love that is shared.

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