

Encounter with Joseph Wresinski

Video from the interview of Claudine Faure, October 1987 / English version (2013)
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Claudine :

Father Joseph, would you explain to me what you mean by misery?

Père Joseph :

Misery is when individuals or families have great, great difficulties. They have to appeal for help because they are not seen as having rights. That, I believe, is misery - to be without rights. And if these families or individuals are without rights, it's because they are considered inferior, incapable of assuming their responsibilities. Even they themselves say: we're considered as nothing.

Claudine :

And what do you think of that?

Père Joseph:

I think it's a profound injustice. All the people and the families I know, especially in France, want to get out of that situation. No one accepts being cold in winter; no one accepts being hungry; no one accepts being unemployed. No one wants to feel they are not considered, that they are looked down on by others, especially as they do try. But, when people are left aside and not considered as worthy, their efforts are not even recognized... I've seen families who, before the visit of the social worker, clean their home from top to bottom. But the house was so miserable, so poor, that when the social worker arrived, she began by saying: «How can you live in such a mess?» That's misery. You make the effort and it's not even recognized. They don't even see you any more.

Claudine :

What led you to encounter these families?

Père Joseph :

First of all, I spent my entire youth in misery. Then, after an apprenticeship with a pastry-maker, I became involved in a youth movement called Young Catholic Workers. There, I was with young people, who, like myself, came out of an environment of pain and suffering.

Then I decided to enter the seminary so I could find the same young people, find the mothers who, like my mother, were killing themselves in order to raise their kids. I said to myself: "As a priest, I'll have the power from God to save them, and put them on their feet. I wasn't mistaken, right?"

All my life, misery was my companion. When I was a country priest in a little village in France, I was as happy as a fish in water. Then, one day, my bishop said, «Joseph, in Noisy-le-Grand, there is a camp with several hundred families and they need a chaplain. If you want, you can go there.» That's how it began, a decision of the Church.

When I arrived, I found so many families coming from all over, with nothing in common, except the misery which brought them together there. They couldn't create a community because a community is formed around the activities it generates. A community is an ideal which people live together. There was nothing there which could unite people, other than misery, suffering and

pain. I came with the idea of joining them, living with them, sharing their life, to try to understand what kept them going, what moved them. Then, I realized that there were so many things which weighed down on them. To begin with, there were about a thousand children and only about one third go to school.

For water, over 250 families had to depend on just a few stand pipes. There was only a shelter with common latrines for all the families. The huts were a sort of half-round structure made of a mix of cement and fiber, about 15 feet wide and 25 feet deep.

Above all, these families needed to be recognized; they needed to know that I had confidence in them. Therefore I dedicated myself for years to assure myself and to assure them that they could and must do everything to get out of that situation.

There was no cement floor in the «igloos» as they were called, no electricity; they got their water from a few stand pipes. We got together to lay cement on the bare dirt floors, to insulate the igloos, and to create rooms with partitions. That way the children would be less cold in the winter, less hot in the summer and they won't dehydrate. It was an extraordinary adventure with the families. At one point, they said: «Why not create an association, make a group?» We agreed and we made an association, which at the beginning was called Aid to all in Need. Later, we realized that Aid to all in Need wasn't it, because the families were doing things to get on their feet; they absolutely wanted to get out of that situation. It was a unique adventure.

One day, in studying the French Revolution of 1789, we discovered the *"Document of Complaints of the Fourth Estate"*. We said, "why not call it "Fourth World" - people on their feet, families who refuse to live in misery and others who unite with them so they could get out of misery. It was like that the Movement ATD Fourth World was created.

Claudine :

What has changed since for the people of the Fourth World?

Père Joseph :

It is that wherever you go and encounter families who have known the Movement or who have advanced with it, they will tell you, «we may not be in agreement about everything in ATD, but ATD has given us honor.» I believe that we have allowed an unknown people, rejected and pushed aside, to exist. It's an important victory.

The second victory is that we young people, men, women decided it was worth the effort to be with the families of the fourth world, and, together with them, pull them out of misery. The second victory of the families is the creation of the ATD Fourth World volunteer corps. That was not an easy task. For example, when I arrived in the camp of Noisy-le-Grand, there was a soup kitchen, a food bank, all that which, unfortunately, still exists today for the poor.

I began by creating a library. Obviously, the people did not understand. It was a project incomprehensible not only for the families but also for the outside. We would hear, "Really now, those people don't know how to read. What's this story about building a library?" I introduced dance lessons, then a beauty salon to give worth to the person so that in turn, they feel worthwhile themselves and give worth to the others. That was some experience because it meant fight on all sides. To create a beauty salon, dance lessons, a library, a kindergarten while people were still living in the mud; to progressively introduce television while people were living in the mud, that was a scandal everywhere.

Another thing. At the beginning, I created a research institute. It was a springboard, if you want, because we had to be founded on scientific data. It was very important at that time, that we gain representation at the international level, at the International Labor Organization, at UNESCO, at the UN, at UNICEF. We did all that expressly; with that backing we would not be seen just a small association. It was not a question of being a big or small association; what was very important was to have supports in all settings.

Claudine :

When you meet a government official, what do you say?

Père Joseph :

What do I say? First of all, I tell them that misery is absolutely intolerable and that they must ask themselves these three questions: what I do, what I say, what I think, does that really serve the poor?

That's what we do as a movement; encourage political leaders, union leaders, religious leaders to ask these question : Do our efforts really serve everyone and not leave out a margin of families and individuals? Are our demands really demands for everyone?

The world of misery is subject to the effects of current events. Every two or three years there are new poor who come to the forefront. As a result, families who have inherited extreme poverty are, not so much forgotten as pushed aside. There again, we have to show that these families have always existed and they want to get out of their situation. If they don't get out, it's because their rights are not recognized. Furthermore, they are not seen as people having rights. If we are not careful, our democracy can go on without ever caring for these families or their situation.

That's why I'm always asking the three same questions: Does what you do, what you say, what you think really helps the cause of the poorest. Does it help them to become more responsible and get out of their situation?

There is no reason why the economic crisis should be more disastrous for the poorest families than for the others. Rather, it's a question of solidarity. Can those who have more accept to have less, so the poorest will have enough? That's all it is. For misery to end in the world, who must accept to have less, not for a charitable reason, but because of a sense of justice. Here, we are not at the level of charity, but at the level of justice.

Claudine :

Could you speak a little about the children of the Fourth World?

Père Joseph :

When we speak of children, we are always surprised, always. It reminds me of Patricia. Her father was an undertaker and it was horrible in the house. Everything was covered with shrouds. The tablecloth was a shroud, the napkins were pieces of shrouds. The mother had left the family; there were six other children beside Patricia. At she would actually attach herself to her father with safety pins so that the police wouldn't take away her and her brothers and sisters.

When the police would come, she and her brothers and sisters would hide, with my help, between the roof and the ceiling of the kindergarten. Sometimes, they would spend several nights there to escape the police. The children remain very much attached to their parents, probably because they realize how much the parents are doing for them.

Often we are puzzled: «Why do the children stay, why don't they go?» They know that their

fathers and mothers have gone through so much for them. The parents are much more than a protection for the children. It's hearts wrapped around hearts. It's quite extraordinary!

I remember the children who, one very cold February evening, were out selling their marbles. It was their mother's birthday. For several days there was no more bread in the house, nothing to eat. They came to see me, but I had nothing except some stale bread which I gave them. So, they sold their marbles and bought some bread for their mother. That's kids for you! There is nothing small or petty with those kids.

I can still see Nono standing in the mud. It was terrible. There were big puddles everywhere. A well-dressed lady came and brought him a bar of chocolate. Nono went to his little sister to share the chocolate with her. That's the kids for you! I was like that when I was a kid. I was looking, searching, inventing, stealing, anything so that we would not be too hungry at home. It's the same with these children. They are champions, the champions of love. It's a shame we don't recognize this.

(a few seconds of music)

Claudine :

And what about school ?

Père Joseph:

School is the temple of knowledge. The children dream of going to school; they want to go. Then they arrive in school and it's all so foreign. They are asked questions they don't understand, or they understand too much. The children are very sensitive to the remarks people make about them or their families. Sometimes in the schoolyard other kids call their mother names, or say that their father is lazy, and the teachers don't do anything to stop it. The kids don't understand that and feel rejected.

I was like that, you know. I am still like that now. I have a hard time to get going. I hesitate; things come slowly, slowly.

True, you need to have patience with those kids and often we don't. For certain, those kids are noisy; things are so chaotic around them. It's not that there is no order in their homes but it's another order - the disorder of misery. They don't pay attention; they are noisy; their language is rough and they are not understood.

They were so happy to go to school and after a while they don't want to go any more. The parents can feel that the children are hurting and they don't want to force them. If the teachers don't come to see the parents or don't come to the neighborhood, they won't understand. The child might have lice or smell bad. They are out of sorts. I organized dance classes so they could feel good about themselves and be proud in front of others in school.

Claudine :

Do they often feel different ?

Père Joseph :

Yes, they feel different because people say they are different. Different also because their second-hand clothes don't fit. I was dressed in second-hand clothes. I always remember the first suit my mother bought for me. It was in a store where the owner liked and respected my mother.

But the sleeves were too long. "He will grow into it" she said "and that way the suit will last two or three years." We are always more or less well-dressed. Yes, we feel different. Other parents tell their children not to be around those children. And they repeat it : « Mother told me that...or, my father told me that» and it stays with you.

Claudine :

Are the parents aware of how important school is for their children ?

Père Joseph :

It's very contradictory. Some fathers will tell you and tell their children : "I never went to school; I don't know how to read or write. I am no more stupid than the other guy. You see, I made it." But when you see the success, it's misery! All the parents want their children to learn. But the school has humiliated the parents so much. Not that it wanted to, but school is another world. It's like the church; the supermarket also. But, at least at the supermarket you can steal something. At school, you can't steal anything, and even less at church.

The adults were hurt a lot in school, a lot. Sometime ago, someone asked me to dedicate a book on poetry. I wrote, «I am jealous.» I am jealous of those who, since they were children, could discover Beethoven, Mozart and others. Me, I could never do it. This is why I want the children to learn to know art, poetry, beauty.

The poor are not envious of the rich because of their wealth. A kid said, «The rich have so much stuff to worry about, they can't be happy.» But, the poor are envious because they suffer from the ignorance in which they have been left.

All the adults who have confided in me, always say the same thing, «Us, we learned nothing. We are like dumb animals.» Therefore, we remain ignorant and we trap ourselves in our ignorance. This is very serious, you know. The injustice of privation is terrible but the injustice of ignorance is the worst evil we can inflict on anyone. It's the extreme injustice because it keeps the poor from what's happening in the world, from understanding people, events, everything. It deprives the poor of the knowledge of God. It's terrible, terrible, terrible. It's the extreme injustice, the worst injustice. This is why the movement has always struggled, the volunteers struggle so that the children, from early on, receive the maximum, benefit from it, develop it, to have a clear mind, a language that can be understood and feel that they exist in front of others.

Claudine :

Do they lack self-confidence?

Père Joseph :

Of course. I, myself, lack self-confidence. It might not be apparent but I was always shy; I always feel that the other person is better, says things better, knows more. It's inevitable, especially since all their life they are put down by others. Nobody asks their advice, even when it concerns them. I remember a mother who told me: « It's very strange; I think I know my children well, but they are taking them away from me. They don't ask me where they could place them, to whom they could entrust them. They ask me nothing, but I know my children well.» That's the way it is. Right from the beginning, the poor are considered as ignorant, therefore unable to express anything. I think that being helped but at the same time being ignored is the worst. It's worth noting that prison chaplains say that most inmates don't know how to read and write and they come from the world of extreme poverty.

Claudine :

Is your action with children of the fourth world the same as with children of the third world?

Père Joseph :

I think at the level of childhood, the approaches are the same. Children, whatever their country, or their culture, have deep in them a thirst for justice, a need for tenderness, a curiosity, a need to know, a need to touch and also a need to be understood and respected. I think that in the third world, the poorest children we meet, also need to be helped to acquire knowledge.

This is why we created the Street Libraries in the cities. Volunteers go in the neighborhoods with books to share what they know with the children; they bring computers in the street so they can use computers in their own neighborhoods. A kid in New York said: «We are better than the kids on Fifth Avenue ; we have computers in our street. They don't.»

(music, images from New- York)

In the third world we created libraries in the field. We go with books where there is a space.

(music and images of street libraries, books..)

We put some stands for the children to draw.

(a few seconds of music)

We also bring different means of expression, for example, making toys right there. Our idea is to be as close as possible to the people. There is always a crowd of boys and girls. It's extraordinary.

One day in Haiti, way back in the countryside, I saw a young man tell the story of Little Red Riding Hood to children who were so eager. You could imagine the wolf leaping out – it was absolutely fantastic! The young people have an amazing capacity for expression.

(image of a young Haitian telling the story of Little Red Riding Hood).

These young people in the third world know the importance of learning and want to communicate it to their little brothers, sisters, and friends. In the Western world, we are overfed with schooling, university, knowledge and we don't realize the richness of it all. And unfortunately we don't have the passion to pass on a knowledge that we sometimes consider as being bourgeois which is absolutely ridiculous. Knowledge is universal; it does not belong to a social class; it belongs to humanity. But, there is a barrier. Many young people who could share their knowledge with others, selfishly keep it for themselves and this is outrageous..

I think that knowledge is seen as banal; people are blasé. People who know think they are superior; they don't realize that other people transmitted it to them at a cost. They gained it because of the sacrifices imposed on workers and laborers whose only knowledge is their trade and rudimentary education.

People don't realize this. This is why the Movement tries to make young people aware. I discovered this in 1968 during the student demonstrations. They spent entire nights at the universities discussing. I could see all these young people, full of intelligence, with considerable possibilities. I thought: «They are wasting their time debating while in poor neighborhoods, millions of children don't know how to read and write.» This is when I created the project "knowledge in the streets." It meant that the students would share what they know with those who, otherwise, would never have the possibility of going to university, not even to learn a trade or a professional training. I went in the cafes to discuss with them and I managed to involve

some of them, but it was hard.

I wanted that the one who knows teaches the one who does not know. Those who know owe their knowledge to others and have the obligation to share it with others. They received it freely even if they had to make a normal effort to gain it. The person who starts working in a factory at 17 also makes an effort, but has no chance to have a diploma or a degree. Knowledge is not a privilege; it must be a gift to all and for all. Therefore those who have must give to those who don't have.

If we had put students in contact with extreme poverty, with those who suffer, if we had shown them what they could do; if the students had put their demonstration at the service of the poor; if they had gone to the housing projects around Paris to protest by doing street libraries, by bringing their computers or their scientific equipment, as some volunteers do, I think that this demonstration would have had meaning. And I think that the manual workers and those having a hard time making ends meet would have agreed with them and would have supported them. They would have discovered there is no gap between the world of the poor and the university. It is the same humanity struggling for the same cause, that of liberty and respect of one another. It's wonderful, you know to struggle against all the injustices. It's worth giving part of oneself, part of one's life and even, for some, all their life.

Claudine :

What would you like to tell young people today?

Père Joseph :

I would say: don't look at yourself, look at others. Don't think so much of yourself, think of others; don't struggle for yourself, struggle for others. And, if you pray, commit yourself. Don't stay confined in communities if they don't reach out. Burst out! A young person is made to burst out, otherwise it's not worth being young. Right? You are young. If you don't burst out, what's the use of being young? It's not when you are my age that you will burst out. You won't have the strength or the imagination.

Claudine :

What does it do to burst out?

Père Joseph :

Ah, fantastic! Fantastic! Meeting people is fantastic. When you meet people, you get something and you give something, therefore you exist. It's fantastic to exist, to know that you exist and you count, not only for each other, but for many.

Happiness shows through; it spreads out. Joy is joy for others. That's what young people want for themselves, for their life because that what's interesting in life; otherwise what interest is there? Young people are not responsible for politics, or for the world economy. Contrary to what they are told, they have no power. On the other hand they have the power to move things because of their hope, of their enthusiasm. They can make people see that the world is not like what they are told. The world is not sad, not ugly; it is available.

All men and women need to give, to meet someone to whom they give and who gives to them. That, I believe is the basis of our humanity.