

Father Joseph Wresinski
Founder Atd Fourth World Movement

HIS LIFE, OUR LIVES

Excerpts from interviews - Translated from the original in French - Copyright ATD Fourth World 1995
The first edition of this booklet was done in 1989 for the delegates of the Fourth World who went to Rome to meet Pope John Paul II.

*The world will change one day
because we will have listened
to the children of the poorest,
and because these children
will take their destiny in hand.*

*As Raymonde reminds us,
«When I grow up,
I'll do what you do!
I'll teach children
to read and write».*

*The world will change one day,
because we want it to.
Humanity will be renewed,
and freed of poverty.*

Father Joseph Wresinski
«A compass for tomorrow»

Father Joseph's Promise

"I will take you up the steps of the Elysée (the official residence of the French President), the United Nations and the Vatican," Father Joseph promised the families housed in the camp for the homeless in Noisy-le-Grand when he met them as his people, a people of suffering and courage.

From then on, Father Joseph traveled around the world, bringing together the very poor and all those who want to take a stand with them. He encouraged everyone he met, each and every one of us, in our commitment for the dignity of the poorest. Thanks to the very poor, he kept his promise to meet people in high places everywhere, bearing witness to the suffering and the hopes of the most abandoned. When he passed away on February 14, 1988, he was confident that together we would continue down that same path to ending poverty and to building fraternity and peace.

Today, we are the movement Father Joseph hoped for. We are like the water which penetrates the earth, drop by drop. Day by day, we all try to make a new friend of whomever we meet, from a homeless person to the secretary general of the United Nations. We continue to carry out together the promise Father Joseph

went to the Vatican in 1989, to the United Nations in New York in 1994. We have spoken with Pope John Paul II and with Mr. Boutros Boutros Ghali.

To all of us who stand together in Africa, in the Americas, in Asia and in Europe, Father Joseph entrusts this message of strength which gives us courage". It will help us to never stop searching for the families who are still alone because of their deep poverty. We will tell them that they are no longer abandoned. We will share with them our conviction that such poverty does not have to continue. We will tell them that Father Joseph has proven, through his own life, that it can be ended and that each and every person, no matter how poor or downtrodden, can hold their head up high. We will bear witness to all the poor people of the world who are standing up together in order to share fraternity, justice and love with ail.

Families of the Fourth World, friends and volunteers, united by Father Joseph, we promise we shall continue on this road of human dignity, together, up to the very end.

Alwine de Vos van Steenwijk,
President, International
Movement ATD Fourth World
November 1995

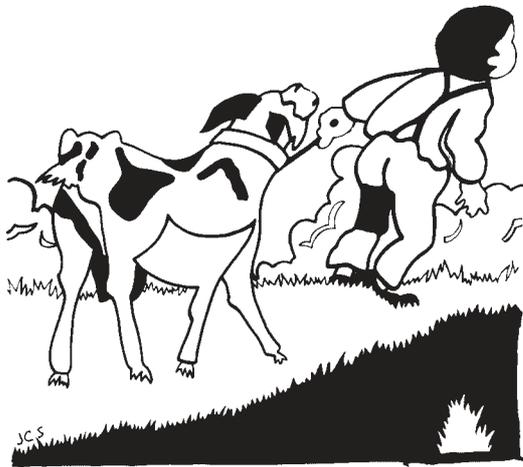
Our goldfinch had died

I remember when I was little, my brother and I found a wounded bird in the street and brought it home. It was a goldfinch. We put it in a cage and fed it, gave it water and took good care of it. We really liked our bird. It used to sing and my mother was happy.

But then things went very badly for us. My father wasn't writing to us any more, and there was no more money in the home. We had nothing and we were at rock bottom. My mother was in tears and we children were all crying. We didn't understand what was going on and we didn't know what to do. I even stole some flowers and brought them to my mother to cheer her up. I took money from the butcher to buy something for her, but nothing made any difference.

Then one day things got better and the sun was shining again. That's when we noticed that our goldfinch had stopped singing. He had died because, in our troubles, we had forgotten him.

That's what human misery does to you: you can never be sure of holding onto the ones you love.



I started to work at four years

I was four years old when I started to earn a living by serving mass. It was real work for me because, in return, I was given something to eat every morning after mass: a big bowl of coffee with milk and bread. On Sundays there was butter on the bread. And each week we were given a few pennies.

It was Sister Augustine who got this job for me. Every day she watched my big brother and I leading the goat down the hill. Having the goat meant that my little sister would have some milk. Sister Augustine cared about us. She was interested in my sister's health and she thought about my mother. She befriended us because we were poor children.



My mother taught us to be proud

Once things were going so badly that they suggested my mother put me in the Auteuil orphanage. They said I could learn a trade there and, besides, I was an unbearable child. I used to steal pears from the neighbors. I tried all the tricks you could ever think of. I can still see myself the day I went into the corner coffee shop, the one that sold cigarettes. I pulled out my pistol with the rubber bullets and yelled «Stick your hands up!» Then I grabbed the money that was on the table. I was really the worst child of the neighborhood and got into everything.

If I had been a child today, the way the society is, I would be put in reform school. As it was, the people in the neighborhood were not too happy about my behavior and sometimes it was hard on my mother. She was afraid of the family's reputation and so people told her I should be put in the Auteuil orphanage. Everybody got involved. Then the night before I was to leave, my mother said, «No, you're not an orphan. You have a mother.»

It was because of my mother that I got involved with very poor families. My father had left, so my mother was on her own with four children. But, thanks to her, we weren't unhappy. We were often humiliated but my mother always knew how to make us feel better again. And thanks to her, we had an identity; we were someone in the neighborhood. People used to call us the «kikis» because of our name.



My mother was always helped in one way or another because, in spite of her poverty, she kept her honor and her pride. She taught us to be proud. When someone wasn't respectful with us she said, «No, I won't accept that.» She made people respect us.

Poverty taught me to take my chances

Life is really extraordinary when you think about it. I went to the Good Shepherd convent to help serve mass so I could earn some money. After that I worked with Marie-Louise who was a butcher and every day at noon time I ran errands. I had little jobs like that here and there. I've always worked. I was about 13 years old when I saw a sign in the window of a bakery: «Young men wanted as apprentice.» I ran to tell my mother. She waited for the store to open and asked them to take me.

Poverty taught me to take my chances. You can do a lot of things if you pay attention to what's going on around you, if you take up what's being offered and if you have the right people around you at the right moment.

Poverty taught me never to refuse a gift when it's offered.

I joined the Young Christian Workers

One night I was walking along the bridge at Nantes just looking at the water and I met Edward, a friend. He said, "I am going to a meeting tonight. It's run by a priest so it should be good." I said to him, "I don't want to start having some priest on my back, telling me what I should or shouldn't do." And Edward answered, "No, it's not like that. Come and see for yourself."

So, I went along with Edward to the meeting and Father Gerbeau had me sit down with the others. He kind of looked at me, and said a word or two to me. And then, he said, "Hey, Joseph, you're new here. Why don't you write the minutes of the meeting?" I didn't write very well because I had little schooling, but it was an honor.

We talked about the Gospel, and about our lives, and the young people there started talking about how they were treated in the factories or workshops. That reminded me of my life as a pastry maker. I had to get up at three in the morning at least three times a week. I was living in a tiny room full of bugs. So I thought to myself: "it's true. It's an odd way to live. We work all hours learning a trade and we aren't given proper housing. Sometimes we don't even eat enough."

That got me thinking. While I was writing up the report of the meeting I thought, "These young people are my friends. They're like me. They're trying to understand what's going on and trying to do something about it." So I decided to join the Young Christian Workers.

At that time the Young Christian

Workers were finding out about tuberculosis among young people. So I started to go down by the docks to look out for some of the fellows who had tuberculosis and talked to them. We even put a petition together and I went to see the Mayor of Nantes! Of course we weren't too welcome and we weren't understood either. But we refused to leave the city hall until the Mayor said he would do something about the situation.

It was a first victory and it made me think of all my mother's victories. Poor people's strength always wins out. We win if we are obstinate, not for ourselves but for others. That's how I started praying and practicing my faith again. And then, one day I said to Père Gerbeau, «What if I became a priest?»



A Priest of Jesus Christ

I became very found of Jesus Christ because he was very poor and he suffered much. He'd been pushed around like us young people. We were in the same situation. But he had kept trying too. He was obstinate. What I loved about Christ, what I still love, is that he is obstinate, not for himself but for others.

Father Gerbeau arranged for me to enter the seminary. I was seventeen years old then and I was in the same classroom as children of twelve and thirteen years old. It was hard, very hard. In fact, I didn't learn very much. I was more concerned about the kids on the river-docks – all that youth going to waste because people didn't want to listen to them. I was thinking about all these young people who should be standing up and crying out, not for vengeance but for love, calling out for justice.

Then I had to do my military service. Even then I used to give out fliers and newspapers. I used to climb over the walls of the army base to go and see the children who lived on the other side. I got caught several times and was punished. Then the war was declared. I was made a prisoner of war but I escaped.

I've always had the feeling that each person bears witness to something, that his life is a testimony, not only for himself but also for others.

Already on the docks in Nantes, then in the army and later when I was a country priest, I was always with the people who were called the "riffraff". But for me, these men and women were all part of a whole people.

They are a people because they are aware of the injustice that weighs down on them and because of their daily struggle against human misery. They are a small group left behind by our societies and they are witnesses, testifying that we do not live up to our beliefs, to our ideas, our ideals, our democracy, not even to our Churches. They bear witness that Christ asked us to leave everything behind – even to the point of death – so that no human being is ever lost.

God gave me a wonderful chance. I never had to look for things to do, or

projects to build. I always listened faithfully to people and to events. People called me the "riffraff" priest but they could have called me something else because, all the same, I was a Priest of Jesus Christ.



My bishop called me to see him

My Bishop, Father Douillard, had been my parish priest in Angers. He knew my mother very well and had a great deal of respect for her. This Bishop taught me a lot, especially respect for the poor because he used to visit my mother twice a year, once for her birthday and another time to ask her to give to the Church. He came not to give, but to receive, and by doing that he really taught me something important.

One day Father Douillard called me to see him and said, «There's a camp in Noisy-le-Grand where there are 252 families, maybe 300 if you count the

ones who are not officially registered. Several priests have tried to stay there, but the families chased them out. Go, if you want. Stay six months or a year and then come back. You are still a diocesan priest.» That was thirty years ago and I am still a priest of that diocese.

When I arrived in the Noisy-le-Grand camp, my first reaction was: these people here will never get out. I made a promise to myself, that they would climb the steps of the Elysée Palace (The official residence of the French President), the United Nations and the Vatican. One day, they will be accepted and recognized by all.

I handed that promise over to all the volunteers and it has become a reality. The Movement became international the very first day I stepped foot in Noisy-le-Grand.

I didn't have a penny to my name

It was Madame Escolle who taught me what I could do in Noisy-le-Grand. Two or three days after my arrival there, I was sitting, looking at the people as they passed by. I was trying to understand a little of who they were, to memorize their profiles and their faces so as to be able to call them by name. The children were around me.

Madame Escolle came and sat down beside me. She said, "I have my children. We have nothing to eat." Then she began to cry. I didn't have a penny, I had nothing. In the evenings I ate whatever people offered me.

So I replied, "But Madame, I have nothing to give you. I mean, I can't give you my cassock!" Then she

looked at me closely and she realized it was true. She stood up and called out, "Come see a completely crazy priest. He doesn't have a penny to his name!" The people came closer and I began to understand that my real strength was to be a priest among the people.

Making people love one another

I always refused to wear civilian clothes in the midst of the people at Noisy-le-Grand. I always wore my cassock because I felt that the families were deeply attached to the image I represented. I was a priest from a Church to which some of them belonged, but they could also say "no" to me. They could reject me and my faith. I was hit and insulted but that didn't matter. I was a priest and I was in the midst of the families.

In some ways, my presence reflected Christ's words: "Blessed are the Poor for they will see God, they will inherit the earth." They already have God with them, they are filled with God. Their poverty is a testimony that God's work can be done if they cry out, not in hate, but in love and if they make people love one another.

The poor have something to say to the world. They have to say that justice is not just for a few, it's not a favor. The poor have to say that justice is a right, and that to love is also a right for the poor as well as for the rich.

The mission of the poor is to make people love one another, to go beyond themselves, to go down into the street. Not to stay with the people there but to take them beyond the street so that they know they are not

inferior; so that they can proclaim the right to justice and especially the right to love.

I have confidence in God

I tell you, my good fortune, received from the hands of God, has always been to believe that He would place in my path the people whom I needed just when I needed them. He leads me to the edge of the precipice and when I am about to fall, He catches hold of me. He takes me back and makes someone appear at my side, who will bring me the answer I have been seeking, so that I don't have to worry any more, because I know that God will find me the right people at the right time.



Young people joined me

Love is contagious. When you really love, you find other people to love. Love cannot be kept to yourself. The families loved us from the beginning, because they realized that we were sincere. I say «we» because I never

did anything on my own. That was my good fortune.

From the start, there were young people who joined me: Erika, from Germany, was one of the first. She died later of cancer. But her life had been completely transformed in meeting the Movement. It was quite extraordinary. Then came Bernadette, who was an atheist; then Anne-Marie who arrived by chance at the Noisy-le-Grand camp, having lost her way. She didn't speak a word of French and I couldn't understand what she said to me. But it didn't matter. I just said to her, «This is your bed, here's your room». It was a crumbling wooden hut, full of insects. And then I took her straight away to the families. She would get on with the washing and cleaning. It was wonderful. It didn't matter that she couldn't speak French; she had such a wonderful smile, and so much energy that people just followed her. After her came Francine and others followed.

The first volunteers to join me were all people who were free; they were not involved in charities. Their hearts and hands were free. Their pockets were empty but their hearts were full of love.

Willing hearts and intelligent minds

One day, Alwine de Vos, a diplomat, arrived at the Noisy-le-Grand camp, and asked me, «What can I do to help?» I said, «You can organize a conference at Unesco.» Astonished, she replied, «At Unesco! But what about all this terrible poverty?» I told her, «The poor need more than willing hearts; they must reach people's minds. We must create a research institute in order to force those who have the power of thought and intelli-

gence, those who have political and religious power,' force them to realize that poverty is not just about people's hearts and sentiments. It's also about intelligence and understanding. »

Poverty is absolutely intolerable and must cease altogether. But to end poverty you have to understand it. The trouble with our world today is the same as years ago. We don't know what very poor families experience from day to day; we can't imagine what they suffer. As long as people haven't understood that, they won't get involved fully and honestly in fighting poverty.

That's why I said to Alwine de Vos, «This is what we have to do, we have to create a research institute.»

If there was only one poor family

The number of people living in extreme poverty is not the most important question.

Even if there was only one very poor family living in misery, the whole of humanity should move to rescue that family. The burden that society forces on very poor families is terrible. The despair that sometimes enters into the hearts of the families weighs heavily on them. And when despair is present, it is contagious. Despair leaves no room for light.

Some suffering can only be answered by prayer, by understanding, by friendship. The families have to feel that they have really reached us. They must know that they have touched us so closely that, at least for one instant, they have changed our lives. It's that change in us which brings hope to them that things will change for them too.

Freed from poverty together

The reason why we created the Taporí group was so that children can save each other, love each other, and share with each other. It's the same for young people.

A young person, who learns a trade for himself and forgets his friends, is a failure. He is on an island atone. Nothing is gained for the others.

In the ATD Fourth World Movement, we want all poor people, the whole group to be freed from poverty. Otherwise, no one will be truly liberated. Because those who have gotten out will be tempted to forget where they came from, to forget their own families, the place where they grew up, their background.

People will tell them, «You're different because you made it on your own», which anyway is not true. And those who have gotten out will end up saying, «I don't owe anything to anyone.» But we owe everything to others: to the mother who fed us, to the father who conceived us. We owe everything to all the people who were around us as we were growing up and who enabled us to meet others and sometimes to meet God.



Pride in ourselves

Pride, to have pride in ourselves, is the important thing. The families must be proud. The mothers are courageous and they must know that. They must be proud of the way they bring up their children with so few resources. The fathers must be proud because, in spite of not having any money, in spite of an empty stomach and without the proper clothes, they still go to work. Yes, pride.

With this pride they will demand everything: they will demand the right to education for their children, and especially that attention be paid to the little children, because, from the earliest age, the children must learn to be proud of their background. They must learn to love where they come from, their father and their mother, as much as themselves. They must be taught to love their little friends, the people with whom they grew up, so that they will never forget and reject their own people.



What I cannot accept

I have never accepted that people be considered useless. It is a tragedy and a scandal. In spite of the hard times our society is going through, it is not right that so many are unemployed. It is not right that so many people drop out of school at sixteen, seventeen without knowing how to read or write, and that young people never get any training.

We have to find work for the unskilled. It is not right that people can stay five, ten years without a job, that some

young people are never given a chance to get a job. It is only because we accept it that such a situation exists. But it is unacceptable.

Teachers, ministers have to go back to the community. They must experience the conditions of life of the poor. People who have education and skills should learn from the haven ots. Those who have responsibilities and power should humble themselves and be ready to listen.

Beginning to learn again

Wherever they are, very poor people are always unwanted. They are in the way because nothing is expected of them. People think they are a burden to society.

We don't want to remember that the very poor have something important to say to our societies, a message about justice, freedom, brotherhood, love.

We could not remain only in Europe or in the United States. Already in 1962, I went to India, where the poor were calling for us. They were waiting for us everywhere. That's how we went first to Guatemala, then to Africa and to Asia, wherever people asked us to come.

We said to ourselves: we have to rediscover what extreme poverty is again and again. We always need to become people without power, empty-handed among the poorest, unable to speak their language. We have to be ready to start all over again so that people can still say of us, «Come and see this priest, he doesn't even have a penny to his name!»

Heads held up in pride

In Third World countries, we encountered the same reality as in Europe and North America. We met children as young as five who are forced to earn a living as I was at their age, children totally deprived of their childhood because of terrible poverty.

In the midst of general poverty we once again found the same extreme human misery we know at home, as harsh, as restless and as little understood. We met men without any work, mothers unable to make ends meet.

And everywhere we encountered the same pride, the same will amongst the families to somehow hold up their heads in pride.



Tomorrow can never be as today

Each and every life has prophetic meaning: the lives of the most humble people, those who have no power, as much as everyone's life. God has made of each one of us the living proof that tomorrow can never be as today.

I have confidence in the Church because the whole of its history has

been involved with the very poor. Historically, the Church has defended the weakest, not in order to keep them weak, or to protect them, but to enable their strength to grow, to burst out and envelop others. That is the mission of the Church.

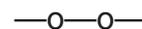
The Church's mission is to enable the whole of humanity to hear the message of the weakest people. They, more than anyone else, know what justice is because they have experienced injustice. They know what they are calling for. More than others, they know what freedom is, because they are deprived of freedom. Because of the never ending hand-outs, soup kitchens, food banks, they know what is to be dependent on others, at the mercy of others.

The love of the poor has always been cut down before it could ripen. Who, then, better than the poor, can tell us what love is?

Love and justice together

I am not discouraged in spite of the scope of misery. I have been through everything that the poor have to go through, all they have endured. Yet I have always spoken these words of hope: «Extreme poverty does not have to exist. Human beings create it and they are the ones who can put an end to it.»

No one accepts that poverty should continue, and especially not the poorest people. That's why I am certain that things will change, that poverty will be overcome. Violence will change nothing, but love and justice together will.



Biography of Father Joseph

Joseph Wresinski was born to immigrant parents in Angers, France. His father was Polish and his mother Spanish. He grew up in a poor neighborhood. His family experienced extreme poverty and social exclusion.

At the age of 13 he became an errand boy in a bakery; later on he learned pastry-making and worked in that trade until he was 17. One of his friends introduced him to the Young Christian Workers' Association (the "JOC") and that is when he began dreaming of becoming a priest. He had to go back to studying and, at age 17, found himself in the same class as 13-year-old youngsters.

In 1936 he became a seminarian. The following year he had to begin his military service in the army. He was still a soldier when war was declared in 1939. In 1940 he was made a prisoner of war but escaped. He returned to his seminary studies in Soissons where his bishop, Father Douillard, ordained him as a priest in 1946. He was then 29 years old.

He became the assistant to a parish priest in Tergnier, a small industrial town. For three years he worked hard at discovering, getting to know, and sharing the lives of the poorest workers' families in and around Tergnier. In 1950, after having been very ill, he was made a parish priest in Dhuizel, a small rural village. From Dhuizel, he also traveled around the country, preaching in different parishes, mobilizing the youth, starting prayer groups, all with the aim of helping people to know and understand the suffering of the poorest people.

In 1956 Father Joseph's bishop suggested that he go to Noisy-le-Grand near Paris, where some 300 families live. Joseph decided to make his own life



one with that of the families. One year later he had founded with them the first association which was later to become the ATD Fourth World Movement. From that moment on, Father Joseph's history merges with that of the families of the Fourth World and the Movement that these families inspired.

With a great deal of courage, he replaced the humiliating soup kitchens and distribution of old clothes in the camp with a library, a kindergarten and a chapel. At the same time, wanting to root out widespread ignorance about extreme poverty and its victims, he created the first Research Institute on extreme poverty, bringing together researchers from all countries and disciplines.

Mobilized by Father Joseph's conviction that human misery must be ended, the first volunteers, from different countries

and different faiths, started to join him in 1960. With these men and women, he created the Movement's International Volunteer Corps which includes in 2004 more than 380 members in 22 countries. They are Catholic, Jewish, Protestant, Buddhist, Muslim or do not profess any religions faith.

For thirty years, Father Joseph never ceased bringing people together around the poorest families. Today thousands of men and women of all political and religions traditions are building an alliance with the most disadvantaged people on five continents.

The children's branch of the movement, Taporí ¹, and the youth movement, Fourth World Youth ² have mobilized children and young people alongside adults and families.

Father Joseph encountered people of all backgrounds. Whether he met a family living in a hut or a head of state in a palace, or even the secretary general of the United Nations, his message was the same: "Extreme poverty is intolerable. We must commit ourselves together to put an end to it."

In 1987, two events marked this last year of Father Joseph's life:

- the adoption of his report, "Extreme Poverty and Social and Economic Insecurity" by the French Economic and Social Council ³. This report, a comprehensive program for combating poverty has been an inspiration to government authorities in Europe and is attracting worldwide attention.

- on October 17, 1987, 100,000 people were present at the Plaza of Liberties and Human Rights in Paris for the unveiling of the stone dedicated by Father Joseph on which the following message is engraved (see below).

On February 14, 1988, Father Joseph passed away. At his request, he was buried at the entrance of the chapel he had built in Méry-sur-Oise ⁴, his final statement of fidelity to the poorest families, to all those who stand by their side, and to God.

October 17, 1987,

On this day, defenders of human and civil rights from every continent gathered here. They paid homage to the victims of hunger, ignorance and violence. They affirmed their conviction that human misery is not inevitable. They pledged their solidarity with all people throughout the world who strive to overcome extreme poverty.

Wherever men and women are condemned to live in extreme poverty, human rights are violated. To come together to ensure that these rights are respected is our solemn duty.

Father Joseph Wresinski

(Notes 1, 2, 3 et 4 : page 14).

1– Taporì: Branch of the ATD 4th World Movement created in 1967 in order to encourage friendship between children of all countries, whatever their racial, religious or social origin.

Through the *Tapori Letter*, published in different languages, and thanks to the Tapori suitcases that travel from one country to another, the children share what they live and what they know, and become friends. To learn more consult: www.tapori.org

2– To learn more, consult www.jeunesse-quartmonde.org

3– The Conseil économique et social [Economic and Social Council] (CES) is France's third assembly. It has a consultative role with the government. It is composed of 230 members who are appointed for five-year terms ; they are representatives from trade unions, employers' representation, agricultural organizations, mutual insurance organizations, etc. It also includes a group of 40 "qualified individuals" from specific fields who are appointed by the President and the Prime Minister. It was in this capacity that Father Joseph Wresinski was appointed a member for the first time in 1979. On February 11, 1987 the CES adopted the report entitled « Extreme poverty and economic and social insecurity » produced by Father Joseph. This document, which had an impact beyond France, established extreme poverty as a violation of human rights and laid the framework

and presented numerous proposals for a law against social exclusion. In 1988, Geneviève de Gaulle Anthonioz was appointed to the same group of qualified individuals in the CES. She pursued this effort in two different ways that inspired what became the July 29, 1998 act laying the groundwork for the battle against exclusions. After the law was passed in 1999, the government agreed to appoint Didier Robert for five years, still with the the same precarious status of qualified individual. This step represents a sort of recognition for ATD Fourth World but the position is not granted for the duration of the Movement.

4– Méry sur Oise, with Pierrelaye, Baillet and Orgerus constitute th international center of the International Mouvement ATD Fourth World. It is a place :

- **of training** for members of the ATD Fourth World Movement
- **to welcome** all people who are committed with very poor families and communities throughout the world, in order to share their experience and learn from one another
- **to follow the activities** of the Movement teams in the world
- **to gather written and audiovisual documents on the history and action of the Movement.** This documentation is the basis for a real knowledge of the very poor, for understanding the causes of extreme poverty, and for devising ways to eradicate it.

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Produced by Mary Rabagliati, Jeanpierre Beyeler.