

A young boy caught in the vicious circle of violence

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My earliest childhood memories go back to a long hospital ward and my mother shouting at the nun who was supervising us. As a young boy, I suffered from rickets, and had been hospitalized to have my legs straightened.

That day, I had told my mother that the nun had not let me have my parcel brought the previous Sunday. My mother, who obviously had tried hard to collect together a few treats, lost her temper. Immediately she wrenched me from the hands of the nuns and brought me back home.

My legs have remained bowed ever since and throughout my childhood and, especially as a teenager, I was subjected to the ridicule and teasing brought on by this handicap, with the added embarrassment of a slight limp.

Thus, my first memory of contact with other people was that of injustice and prejudice which were to leave their mark for the rest of my life. This would probably also explain my intolerance of runny noses, of crooked legs and of these young bodies already marred which surround me now in emergency housing, in the hovels and in the slums.

My mother shouting at the nun had not surprised me. I was used to shouting. At home, my father shouted all the time. He would beat my older brother much to my mother's despair, as it was always his head that bore the brunt. He was cursing my mother and we lived continually in fear.

It was only much later, when I was a man, sharing the life of other men like him and of other families like our own, that I understood that my father was a humiliated man. He suffered because he felt he had failed in life, he was ashamed of not being able to give his family security and happiness.

This is the real evil consequence of extreme poverty. A person cannot live such a humiliated life without reacting. The poor react in the same violent way, nowadays as well as in the past.

In the meantime, this was my introduction to the vicious circle of violence when I was a young boy. Violence was the way of reacting to everyday difficulties of all kinds. Without my realizing it, violence was becoming for myself and for my father the way of washing away the numerous humiliations which extreme poverty inflicted upon us.

It still amazes me, after all these years that my parents talked only about money. The very people who had no money would forever be arguing because of it. When some money did come into the household, they quarreled about what to spend it on.

Later, when my mother was on her own, she would still always talk to us about money. And when she talked about the people we associated with, it was always to say that they were rich. When speaking of the parish priests, she would say "they are rich". Even the woman who ran the small neighborhood grocery store was a rich woman in her eyes. My mother was

not jealous, but when one is hungry and in need, the only thing that counts is what fulfills the need. This is still the same today, and in the gray areas around our cities and towns, quarrels and exchanges always end up being about money matters.

I was committed to this fight for food at a very young age. At four years old, I was the one who led the goat to the lower meadows. This goat fed all of us children including my newborn sister. When I took the goat, I would pass the big gate of the Good Shepherd convent, where a nun would sometimes chat with me. One day, she asked me whether I would serve Mass every morning. That day, I became employed for the first time. It was employment indeed as far as I was concerned. In return, for serving mass, I would be entitled to a big bowl of coffee with milk, with bread and jam and, on holy days, butter. In addition, I would be given two francs a week. It was those two francs which made me decide to take the job.

This was how I began to support my family before the age of five. Every morning, for almost eleven years, my mother called me for the seven o'clock mass. It took me at least ten minutes to run to the chapel which was behind the big convent walls. In the winter I was cold and I was frightened of the dark. Be it windy or rainy, I walked along the long Saint-Jacques street, almost bent double and half asleep, sometimes shouting with rage. Then I went down rue Brault, which was deserted and hostile, towards the meadows and I would go and serve Mass for the sisters so that forty sous went to mother. I don't think I ever missed a single one of these morning duties and it still seems that my whole childhood revolved around them.

Mother must have been greatly in need when it came to feeding us, to accept throwing such a young boy onto the streets every day. I must also have been aware of her feeling of helplessness so that I took on this constraint without bitterness or anger against God.

It was not long after Mass that I had to repeat the journey and go there and back at midday. As we were the poorest people in the area, there was nothing unusual about the fact that, on leaving school, I would rush out to the convent again, this time to collect in billy-cans or empty tins a meal made up of leftover food. The Madeleine sisters gave us split peas, lentils, potatoes and sometimes a few pieces of meat, plus the huge loaf which was our staple diet at family meals.

So every day of my childhood was influenced by the life, the prayers and the food of the Good Shepherd sisters. It meant that we did not go hungry.

I sometimes think of this now when I see children climbing onto rubbish heaps, or following their father's cart on the way to clear some cellar or attic. They pick through the garbage; they salvage metal. I used to serve Mass and wait for our food at the convent door. As in the past, destitute children have no childhood; responsibilities are given them as soon as they can walk.

They were times, however, when like the poor children of today, I used to play and laugh. I probably used to create my own secret corners, my hiding places, and my exploratory routes in the old part of Angers where I would build imaginary labyrinths with my friends. However, there was this convent route which I had to follow every day, the path of shame of my childhood, which has wiped from my memory anything which might have been a consolation.

There were other paths of shame still linked to the gnawing need for food. I can picture myself as a small boy, taking the bottle of walnut oil bought for 50 centimes back to the grocer's. If it was not full right to the cork, mother would send me back to have a few drops added. It is the never-ending, humiliating struggle for the poor to satisfy their hunger.

Later on, pieces of horsemeat that were too tough had to be taken back to the butcher's. At that time I was seven and had found another job, running errands for Marie-Louise, the butcher, who in return, would give me the equivalent of two francs worth of horsemeat every day. Mother would insist that the meat be fresh and tender. She did not hesitate to send me back, if need be, to demand, proof in hand, better quality for the family table.

Despite our shame, however, we were strong and I would unwittingly take it out on other boys because of this oppressive burden to support my family. I remember, at the age of six, beating up a young adversary and leaving him in the hedge.

When my mother went to see the nun from kindergarten, to know if I could start elementary school, the nun agreed readily. "Of course", she said, "send him there. He beats everyone up here".

Financial hardship, shame and violence were all linked from early childhood.

I never remember coming back from school and finding my mother happy at home. A deserted wife, she never got over the fact that she had to support four children on her own. Then there was news of my father and above all the money he was supposed to send, that never came. The gas bills to be paid, the coal for the winter, the stove to be replaced...

It was nearly always cold at our house. The former ironworks we lived in was full of draughts. The air would penetrate at the top of the doors and through the partitions. One of these partitions was made of crates covered in wrapping paper. When the paper split, the wind would whip us.

The other reason for the cold was that all the flats above ours were linked via a common chimney. The stack was often blocked and when we had a fire, Therese, the tailor's daughter would come down to swear at my mother because her flat was filling with smoke. To avoid conflict, mother would take from the stove the pieces of coal which we had brought from the gasworks slag heaps--these pieces of coal which we had had so much trouble in sorting and which by their poor quality seemed to accentuate rather than combat the cold that prevailed in the house.

How to explain my mother's passivity which I find repeated today in so many poor mothers whom I meet in destitute areas. Her anxiety about upsetting neighbors stemmed probably from her tiredness but more so from fear. Mother knew that she was a foreigner and she never lost her fear of being sent back to Spain, of the police coming to arrest us for God knows what reason--just like the mothers in emergency housing who are constantly afraid of people coming to do them harm.

As for Therese, the tailor's daughter who came to rebuke her, I was quite young still, the day I took the poker and brandished it in front of her, shouting. I do not know what I said to her in my infantile anger, but since that day, our meager fire was able to smolder in the old stove

which had a cracked hearth and which we mended constantly using clay which we collected in the neighboring meadows.

My mother would often complain to others about her torments, about me, the worries that I caused her, my poor progress at school and that I wet the bed. That was an added burden of shame on my shoulders because the whole neighborhood knew about it. The poor do not hide their wounds. They have no strength in reserve to mask the problems of an existence which exhausts them.

However, it was thanks to my mother that I was able to take the exam for the primary school leaving certificate. There were very few of us in the independent Catholic school who did not pay tuition and we were at the bottom of the class. When it came to the exams on leaving school, the principal did not want to take the risk of having me as a candidate. He had not let my eldest brother take the exam, and my mother had not taken offense. However, when it came to my turn, she did not resign herself so easily. She knew that I was not stupid, but that I had too much responsibility on my shoulders, that I suffered too much, and I had too deep a perception of injustice. For those of us who received charity but never all that was due to us, injustice was our daily fate. My mother did not want one more injustice to be done to me. It was she who registered me for the exam.

Only today do I know of the reserves of indignation and courage needed by my mother to defend her children. She obstinately defended me again when the charity ladies of the parish conceived the idea of placing me in the orphanage at Auteuil. A plan which was apparently reasonable but very humiliating, both for children born in poverty and for their mothers, to have them brought up apart from other children.

In one of those sudden bursts of dignity which were so characteristic of her, my mother refused. She preferred to relinquish the benevolence of parish charity.

Yet we were already excluded. As we were too poor, we were set apart from the other people in this low-middle class neighborhood, linked to them through charity and not through friendship.

We were not the only ones. I remember the woman who was often drunk and her illegitimate son. When her son came back in the evening, he used to find his mother lying in the kitchen and he would have to drag her to her bed. He would sometimes come to us and mother would invite him to share our bread and soup.

Then there was the witch. She did not want dogs to stop beneath her window. We children used her wall as a urinal and she hurled abuse at us. We liked her and that was why we annoyed her. We would not have annoyed Rétif the butcher or Cesbron the carpenter. They were the important people of the district; they were not of our world.

One day, the witch was found dead from starvation in her slum. For two weeks no one had visited her. That evening, mother cried, because that could have happened to us. "Who would have cared about us?" she said. "That's how I will die".

Was it through her that I learned to fight, not as a means to avenge humiliation, but to free an excluded people?

One day, one of the oldest boys in the school--his name was Siché--became furious with a puny boy. He drove him back against the wall of the latrines and punched and kicked him.

What happened in me? I threw myself at him. Now it was my turn to kick and punch. I scratched his face until the teacher came to remove me by force.

Why had I done this? This puny boy was nothing to me. What was I doing defending him? It is, however, he who remained in my memory and not the punishment that I had brought upon myself. I was expelled from school but everything which happened after the fight remains a blur. What I do remember as a turning point was this boy being beaten up by Siché, who was so much stronger than him. It seems to me that this was the start of a struggle in which I might be the loser, but in which I would be involved obstinately for the rest of my life.

Joining in the struggle for the excluded is not, however, that simple because one does not become an activist for individuals scattered here and there: a drunkard mother, a witch, a puny boy. I had to meet them as one people, to discover that I was one of them. I had to find myself again, as an adult, in these boys who live in the slum housing surrounding our towns and in these young unemployed people who cry with rage. They perpetuate the memory of my miserable childhood and they tell me that this people in rags has always existed.

It is within our power to stop this perennial condition. Extreme poverty will not exist in the future if we accept the task of helping these young people to gain awareness of their people, to transform their violence into a lucid struggle, to arm themselves with love, hope and knowledge in order to bring to a close the fight against ignorance, hunger, hand-outs and exclusion.

It cannot just be a government matter; it is also a matter of people wanting to walk alongside those who are excluded, and to link their own lives with theirs, sometimes at the cost of leaving everything behind in order to share their fate.