

The Violence Done to the Poor

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(Original: French)

The violence of indifference and contempt

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

They can only withdraw, leaving the usual paths. Then they have to blot themselves out and become forgotten in emergency housing settlements, slums, and shanty towns. They are outcasts.

The violence of contempt and indifference causes extreme poverty, since it inevitably leads to exclusion, to the rejection of one human being by others. It ensnares people who live in poverty in mechanisms that crush them 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, and breaks 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 extreme poverty. It is often hidden behind the mask of order, reason, and even justice.

It is in the name of moral order that we pry into their love for the people who are dear to them, shaking them up, sometimes belittling them, and always judging them, instead of turning that love into the starting point of family advancement. Still, even if it does not conform to our moral standards or our laws, their love is doubtless the only hope they 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 on 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.

It is also our sense of "reason" that convinces us to take freedom away from the disinherited. Don't we know better than they do what's good for them? Why confront them with real choices which they wouldn't know what to do with? So, we even go so far as to tell them where they are going to live. Then we accuse them of not taking any initiative 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 their endeavours, and 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 strike out and injure 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, setting up for them a peculiar order that plunges them into chaos, folly, and injustice.

A violent order engenders an order of chaos and violence

Inside this order, which seems reasonable and fair to us, people in poverty settle down as if they were in a normal situation. They respect its laws and obligations. Already crushed, they behave accordingly, but the violence of this order enters into them.

The law that they endure becomes the one that they will make others endure, and the obligations that are imposed on them become those that they will impose on people close to them and on their surroundings.

However, people in poverty are not violent in the same way as 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 harsh, and their violence will apparently be unfocused. A man beats his wife, insults his boss, threatens the worker in the job centre, and sends his friends away. He is not only a violent person; he's infuriated. He picks fights with his neighbours; he swears at charitable ladies who clutter up his life and who, behind their gentle manners, appear to be conduits of the biting and relentless violence he is enduring.

So, anyone who is not poor flees these enraged men, feeling themselves lucky to get away so easily. They escape from these men who are dangerous and agitated and 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 respect for order cannot conceive of such a way of communicating. Churches will think they are wise by allowing them into their programmes 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 humankind throughout history. Never so much as today have the utterly destitute been so stunted and mutilated, deprived of their freedom, their rights, their powers, their honour, and their love – people who 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 treated like this, who are known only through the prism of vice, of sin, or even of madness? Who are these human beings whose features are ravaged and who, indeed, are recognised because of this: "Doesn't every society have its own refuse? And 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 that are speech and understanding, they cry out to us through their filth, through the smell of extreme poverty, and through their chaotic, violent lives.

Are they crying out about vengeance, robbery, rape, or restitution? Are their intentions really opposed to ours?

In fact, they are neither refuse, nor dangerous, nor even filled with hatred towards those who oppress them. Behind the broken windows of their homes and the jagged boards of their shelters, in the shameful dark space of their Nissen huts and in daily searches for work, for a friend, for an outstretched hand, for a God to believe in, they suffer the unrelenting violence of hopeless waiting. And if they sometimes clench their fists, it's not because they are holding hatred inside them; it's because in poverty, there is no one to wait for; there is no Jesus Christ stretching out a hand to shake theirs firmly and warmly. Their violence comes from the despair of feeling unworthy, not from being convinced of their own rights and determined to claim them by attacking us.

We are always shutting tighter the doors of our churches

Yet violence forever calls for violence, and our reaction to the unconscious and blind violence of the powerless is one of repulsion, contempt, and ever-increasing rejection; it is banishment from the common

heritage and confinement in emergency housing shelters. Our reaction is police officers, patrol cars, and bulldozers that, by levelling shanty towns, destroy that caricature of the private property of marginalised people: some pieces of wood, some scraps of sheet metal or tar paper, and a few old crates found in the rubbish of an open-air market.

Our reaction is to raise even higher the fortified walls around our own interests, privileges, and 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 know what their lives are really like.

They have become strangers to us – people whose suffering we consider to be justifiable.

Agreeing to listen to them would mean running 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 great danger they make us face and 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 work to overcome poverty. It is our fault because we are too likely to talk about extreme poverty as an afterthought, a slight oversight, a small accident in the history of humanity marching forwards. And we often suggest 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 Pillars 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 aircraft, opening factories, reaching planets – that is the real history of our time. And we want to be part of this history and this epoch. So, wanting to eradicate extreme poverty is not really that important; it's the praiseworthy endeavour 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 vital; it's surely not worth getting too involved or "ruining" one's life.

This shows that we have misunderstood the insidious, constant violence inflicted on people in poverty, which means that people are being lost while we conquer outer space.

We have not understood that the awkward violence of the dispossessed, far from being an accident in our history, 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, isn't there only one kind of violence: that of exclusion, of rifles shoved against the chests of people relegated to hardship?

In our opinion, there is another kind of violence that is infinitely more powerful. It is rooted in the very core of our humanity, drawing life from our hearts, from the best of ourselves, from our will to spread joy and peace. It draws life from our encounter with a charitable God, with our ideal of justice.

It is the kind of violence that brings about real transformation, deep and permanent, a genuine renewal that restores vitality, respect, honour, glory, and happiness to all people, be they rich or poor. It is this violence – the violence of love – which we have pledged to one another because, like it or not, we are human to the core and we have realised that we can never regard another person as a stranger or an enemy.

This is also the destiny of the dispossessed. If we knew them even a little, we would realise that they ask of us only to be seen as human beings and that they want nothing more. They ask for everyone to be recognised as human beings and to be treated as such.

They ask nothing more than this: that schools develop their children's minds, that churches be a path towards the communion of all human beings with the God of their own faith, that society be fair and honest, and that technology and the economy be used 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 honour, 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 take action, and to pray. If the most disadvantaged people challenge us, if they ask questions 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 have an infinitely greater vision, and to be more ambitious than we are. They are taking us into a swirling current where we will totally re-evaluate what humanity means.

Will the oppressed become the oppressors?

Of course, we could conceive of another, more classic, type of revolution often seen in history, which would consist in organising the poor so 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 rich, would not

chase them off and cast them out in turn? Who can assure us that, once he had power, he would not organise violence and destruction to his own ends?

Will the dispossessed of today emerge as tyrants who will oppress the rich once they've been stripped of their power? Once the downtrodden of yesterday are elevated to power, how can we prevent them from again turning justice, honour, and prayer for all into injustice, lies, hatred, and war in tomorrow's world?

The current situation of marginalised people, the necessary transformation of the world for their benefit, must not make us forget this new danger: that the disinherited in turn will seek to oppress and to destroy human beings. The source of this certain danger is that people living in poverty see people with power today living in affluence and using their resources to dominate and crush others. If one day the downtrodden took the place of the rich, 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 people among them who are imbued with humanity, respectful of all others, bountiful, working in real and concrete ways to shape a new world based on justice, love, truth, and peace? What if they found people among the wealthy today who are obsessed with the dignity of their fellow creatures? Then there would be hope that they would choose them, rather than the others, as models; would choose to cooperate with them in shaping the world.

Love engenders love

The future will really be shaped by us personally, whether we build it with the dispossessed 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 the violence done to ourselves, the violence of ridding ourselves of our pride, of our spirit of domination; the violence of freely giving up the resources that we will contribute to the achievement of brotherhood, truth, and peace.

If people living in poverty saw us really living with few resources, 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 lifelong experience and requirement, and we cannot be truly poor in any other way than the one we have chosen. That is true for all of us who challenge today's world of affluence. 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. Reaching tomorrow's world will require us to be open to the call for love rising from the earth. It will require us to surrender our belongings. Its foundations will involve putting together and sharing what has been given to us so that everything can be useful for everyone and for their happiness.

But even if we let go of what we have, this will not be accepted or recognised 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 people but also to identify with everything that within them is truth, love, and justice, to be in solidarity with their cause and to love 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 wholeheartedly with us to shape a world of justice, truth, love, and peace. And if, on this earth, there is still any violence, it will be the violence of love that is shared.