

# SCIENCE, THE POOR RELATION OF CHARITY<sup>1</sup>

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*Preface to the book by the sociologist Jean Labbens in 1965: "La condition sous-prolétarienne. L'héritage du passé."*

There is much talk today about poverty in wealthy nations. We have left the post-war years behind us, when the term "poor" appeared to have been deleted once and for all from the economic and social vocabulary of the West.

Yet, although such words have reappeared, they no longer designate the same people or the same problems. In addition, the characteristics attributed to poverty differ from one book to another, according to the nature of the author's experience or studies. These same characteristics may just as well be applied to a family which has accidentally fallen below average due to unemployment or a father's absence, as to a family which, from generation to generation, fails to enter the industrial age and, as a result, is still living in poverty from another age.

When we speak of poverty in these pages, we mean – since this is the reason for all our endeavour - the most destitute social layer in wealthy societies. We are referring to people whose economic poverty is accompanied by deprivation at all levels, including cultural, physiological, social and spiritual. We mean those who have not been able to enter our modern structures and remain outside the mainstream of the life of the nation. We will ask scholars to define precisely this underclass which appears to us almost in the guise of Lazarus from the Bible. It is our task, we who share their lives, to suggest to universities that they take an interest in these people. It is the role of universities to teach us and to help us to introduce new concern for them into our temporal and spiritual institutions.

## ELEMENTS OF THE VICIOUS CIRCLE

Those who work in these institutions and in the Church and who wish to follow the poor, generally find themselves in an uncomfortable position. Their attempts to help come to nothing. The poor remain as they are, or, if they change slightly following one measure or another, they do so in an unexpected fashion. Thus, frustrated in our efforts, irritated by our powerlessness, we endeavour to tear them apart, to reduce them to the utmost, by denying their background, by destroying their district, by acting as if their group did not exist, by breaking up their families too and, finally, as we have seen in certain highly developed countries, by dismantling them, piece by piece, through psychiatric care.

These apparently cruel attempts to do away with an underprivileged social class often mask the deep anxiety of those who fail to overcome their miserable living conditions. They find themselves all the more ill at ease since the reasons for their failures are difficult to grasp. Explanations are certainly not lacking. It is hardly necessary to invoke the concept of the "bad" poor, those who, owing to some kind of moral defect, refuse to leave their circumstances. Then there was the concept of the poor as victims of their mental shortcomings, until today we have reached an infinitely more subtle notion of poverty as a vicious circle. According to some, sub-human material conditions cause mental and physical

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states, attitudes and a way of life which prevent the poor from moving upwards. Transmitted from father to son, they perpetuate poverty, rendering it hereditary, so to speak. Can this reasoning explain the astonishing imperviousness of the underprivileged to the influence of the society around them?

It is fair to say that their living conditions lead them to confront their existence in particular ways. A certain state of poverty imposes particular ways of living and behaving on its victims. We know that wherever society has entered the industrial age, the very poor react to poverty with similar attitudes which do not favour their advancement. Thus, the underclass has a universal face.

For example, one of its traits is marital instability. This can be seen just as often in Lima's *barridas* and Calcutta's slums as in the shanty towns of the Paris region. Among the poorest levels of the population in these deprived areas, a man views his conjugal relationships on a day-to-day basis, with no real commitment to the future. He shares part of his existence with a woman, and then she leaves him, or he leaves her. He does not necessarily turn to another woman, but may begin another kind of life, such as a man living alone, albeit on an equally temporary basis. He does not adopt this new existence any more permanently than the previous one, and one day he will appear as the father of a vulnerable family.

There has been no consideration of whether the poorest generally value this instability. For myself, I am unaware of any examples. Quite the contrary, while living in instability, they most often disparage it. Not knowing how to do otherwise, they accept the precariousness of their unions as an almost inescapable reality from which they draw neither pride nor satisfaction. Rather, it adds to the discredit in which they live, not only with regard to the outside world but also within their own community.

Thus, we would hesitate to consider conjugal instability and common-law marriages as part of a particular culture, as some do. The poor in industrialised countries cannot be unaware of the values imposed by an omnipresent national culture. The prevailing society conveys its ideals of family, professional and social life, be it through such things as mass communication, social service interventions or a childhood spent on public assistance. While society does not provide the poor, unlike its more privileged members, with the means to live according to the values it teaches, neither does it leave room for the poor to develop their own opposing culture, thus allowing them to justify themselves, at least in their own eyes. Unable to live in the prevailing culture, at the very most the poor can flee from it, physically, by taking refuge on the fringe of society and morally, by wrapping themselves in a state of indifference which will protect them from discouragement and shame. In welfare states (especially in Europe), the idea that they have the right to live according to their own values does not even occur to them. Moreover, if they persist, we destroy what is essential to them by removing their children. Far from being called upon to assert themselves, they are doomed to flee, but it is a flight that leads nowhere.

Doubtless it could be said that this degrading inability to live in the same way as others comes from a lack of certain material means. The lack of housing or overcrowding, precarious and inadequate income, and insufficient nutrition are factors which easily explain a way of life and a certain universal psyche among the very poor. However, they are not the only issues involved. They are not enough to explain why the underprivileged remain poor in times of economic progress. Another element which is an essential link in poverty's vicious circle yet is seldom referred to, is the almost complete absence of communication with the non-poor layers of society.

The poor are who they are and they remain so because a certain degree of material deprivation is accompanied not only by specific behaviour but also flawed communication with the surrounding world. This denies the poor the necessary conditions to hear and to be heard. At a certain level of poverty, man is a stranger in the welfare state. No longer part of the social

group, he is not in a position to bridge the gap with the few articles he is given.

## INADEQUATE COMMUNICATION

In order to make communication between the underclass and the wealthier classes possible, there must be a common perception, at least in certain areas, of beings, things and situations. We may think this is so since, as we have said, in today's world, even the marginal population is in contact with the prevailing culture, be it through work, social services, television or cinema. It is true that through these means they acquire certain notions of the values which make up our culture. However, what is striking is a sort of discrepancy in the way the underclass perceives certain values, because they do not experience them in their own lives in the same way as the outside world. We tell the poor that work is a part of man's dignity, that children need education and that marriage is honourable. The poor believe this without ever entirely grasping these values through real-life experiences. Their personal experiences consist of humiliating work, education from which their children cannot benefit and the precariousness or impossibility of marriage. Knowing nothing else, they are unable to comprehend the difference between the outside world and themselves. They sense that they are different from others, but never understand exactly why. This muddled situation gives every contact between the poor and the non-poor a note of ambiguity which distorts the relationship and most often results in their exchanges being at cross purposes.

Robert Estève,<sup>2</sup> who found a position as a labourer at the markets after months of searching in vain, said to his wife: "I won't go if you can't get me a new pair of trousers." For weeks, there had been nothing at all to eat at the Estève home, and four children had been placed into institutional care. However, Robert would not go to work unless he was not only dressed properly, but in the same way as everyone else.

Robert wanted nothing better than to work on a regular basis and to be part of the working world. Instinctively, he knew that work was a source of dignity. Only, he was never introduced to the mysteries of transforming matter and his hands were not familiar with the tempo of this work. They could not be: Robert's whole existence had been divided between a poverty-stricken urban environment, the army in Indochina and the slums. He had never learnt how to work. In fact, he was not even useful for the most difficult, most dehumanising tasks which are reserved for his more enlightened brethren in the working class. All that remained for him was a position as an insignificant underling. Sometimes he accepted this with a degree of indifference, at others he rejected it in disgust.

He also sometimes thought he could avoid it by deluding his social circle: he would not reveal his address in the slums; he would dress himself with care to hide his despised social background. He was not to deceive them for long. He was not only interchangeable, like workers, but he was also useless, and those who met him soon noticed.

What kind of dialogue can exist between this man and his co-workers or his employer? A genuine worker is unable to recognise himself in Robert. What he sees is not so much a poor man's hands, unintelligent and unskilled, which, in fact, are the clue to everything. Above all, in Robert he sees a kind of disrespect or indifference towards his task, which he interprets as disrespect or indifference to the dignity of work. This would be of no consequence if he did not know that behind Robert there is an entire class of disparaged workers who disparage their tasks. The true worker views this class as a burden which could compromise his own advancement. We cannot say that the working class fears the underclass; this is no longer the case. However, working class people do not like finding people from the underclass in their path and recoil from them, if only by showing a complete lack of interest in them. Thus, the worker instinctively backs away from Robert, treating him with indifference or

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<sup>2</sup> For obvious reasons, we will use imaginary names throughout this work for people who have been involved in our research.

condescension. He humiliates him or relegates him to the role of “dogsboby”. The less he is integrated into the working world himself, the more he will intensify this behaviour.

Needless to say, Robert often changes and remains idle for varying periods of time. For all that, he does not lose the dream instilled in him through his contacts with a more fortunate world: that of, one day, being a respected worker. Interventions by official government services or charity workers periodically reinforce his hope. Without properly understanding his actual potential, they sometimes think they are doing the right thing by offering him a position in a small business, where working conditions are less impersonal. Such a context which individualises the worker is beneficial for those who know where they stand in relation to others. Robert, on the contrary, will come up against insurmountable demands. He will find himself stripped bare, with all of his shortcomings plainly visible. It would be better for him to remain in a more impersonal working environment, in a factory or at the markets, where he would be more likely to pass unnoticed.

Robert himself will make no better an appraisal in this respect than those who wanted to help. He is easily influenced and allows himself to be readily convinced by any suggestion. Extreme poverty and chronic dependence have not bestowed a strong personality on him, capable of judgement and control. He is as easily mistaken about himself as about people and situations he encounters. A simple job proposal, either made thoughtlessly or with the intent of getting rid of him, may be seen by him as a token of esteem for his work abilities. Thus he manages to dazzle his employers for brief moments, exaggerating his potential and being overzealous. In his euphoria, he interprets every kind word as evidence of special consideration. Certainly, this will not last and, after the first mishap, he will again feel out of place. In his eyes, every reprimand becomes a snub. His boss will be perceived not as the representative of one class which exploits another, but rather as a personal enemy. Here again, there is no possibility of dialogue. Robert will end up being fired, or will leave his job on a sudden impulse to avoid the dishonour of being fired. He will not even claim his final pay cheque.

For years, he has stubbornly refused to file for unemployment benefit; to his mind, this step is far too closely linked to humiliating circumstances. The worker and even the working class labourer are able to view unemployment as a social injustice that gives rise to compensation. Class consciousness can at least partially protect them from a feeling of personal discredit. By requesting unemployment benefits, they claim a collective right. For Robert, the same situation of unemployment is seen differently. He does not have the sense of belonging to a class. He feels he is being persecuted personally. Unemployment is the sign of his personal defeat and recourse to benefits highlights his inferiority as a man. Even contacts with the administrative and social services whose role it is to assist him stop short.

This is only a simple example of how differently things are seen from opposite sides of the barrier. We could find other illustrations like this, extending to all aspects of the lives of individuals, families or groups. Viewpoints do not coincide; the same words do not correspond to the same ideas. Attitudes and approaches are misinterpreted. Misunderstanding reigns between the underclass and the assimilated classes.

## THE ILLUSION OF DIALOGUE

Yet, those who approach the very poor today with the goal of advancement or research can easily delude themselves about the possibility of communication. No-one is able better to foster their illusion than those who live on the fringes of society.

This remark should be qualified: it would be wrong to suggest there is a gap between the underclass and the assimilated classes. In reality, these worlds are in contact and there is some mobility between the two. The most developed members of the underprivileged class mix

with the least-integrated members of the working class, namely those who remain part of a non-organised working class. They are indistinguishable in certain downtrodden districts. Not all underprivileged families resemble the Estève family, and we sometimes have difficulty understanding why a particular hard-working family has ended up on the fringes of these poor districts. The family seems to conform to the norms of an assimilated environment: the man works, the household is well kept, the children go to school. Only those whose situation is slightly better can discern that they do not fit in, although it is imperceptible to others' eyes. They make no mistake, and they are the ones who deny the family the social intercourse they need to integrate into their modest level.

Our friend Collivaud is one such person who thus remains on the fringe. Brought up in state care, trained to do the lowliest farm work, he had the good fortune when he was twelve to meet a blacksmith who taught him his trade. Thanks to him, Collivaud gained professional experience which meant that, throughout his entire life, he would have respect for work and would instil this respect in his children. Poor and illiterate, returning to an underprivileged urban environment after his military service, he could have joined a social class through his profession. Indeed, he found a stable job in a factory. However, as fate would have it, he lost his left arm at the age of thirty and his only way out was thus barred.

With his modest career as a boilermaker shattered, he even managed to damage his reputation in the cheap hotel where he lived, owing to his large number of children, his drinking that disrupted his family, his servility typical of the destitute... Finding himself back in the slums, he settled down. He lived there quietly with his large family, getting by on menial jobs – night watchman, letter carrier. He took an interest in his children's education and their professional training. To the ill-informed outside observer, he appeared to be a member of the working class, pushed back to the fringes of society by misfortune, all the more so as he readily believed it himself. He, also, was incapable of grasping the slight gap which made him an outsider, even in the lowest class. He had always heard of belonging to a social class, but he had never experienced it, so he did not know exactly what these words meant and he did not realise that he himself had always been excluded.

The entire top social layer of the underclass thus deludes both the observer and themselves, claiming to come from an accepted social class and looking down upon the more destitute, unstable layers beneath them. As a result, the dialogue has no basis in reality.

We are no doubt less easily mistaken about lower social classes, where overall appearances are less deceptive. The further we descend the social ladder, the more poverty assumes its true colours as a destructive force to man's harmony. Human order recedes from these places, giving way to extreme poverty's incoherence. While they are not all destitute, homes begin to look strange; incongruous objects can be seen together, reflecting the residents' disarray. Robert Estève appears on the threshold of his "igloo"<sup>3</sup>, his complexion greyish due to malnutrition, yet dressed with care. Inside, a scrawny child lies motionless on a bed covered in rags; the radio is on and there is even a hired television set, because Robert has had the electricity installed. It could be said that at the Estève's level, poverty begins to reveal its true nature. It does not create its own cultural values, but places human beings in a kind of perpetual improvisation. With Robert, we no longer find the imperfect, yet more or less stable, conformity of a person such as Victor Collivaud. Rather, he conforms to one thing or another, without adopting a lasting mode of behaviour, be it normal or deviant. It is as if he is buffeted between the dream of what he would like to be and what reality imposes on him.

Although the outside observer is not mistaken in seeing this behaviour as unbalanced, he is often wrong about the nature of this instability. Like Victor Collivaud, Robert presents his situation as being the result of personal misfortune. Unlike Victor, he feels somewhat guilty:

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<sup>3</sup> The word "igloo" refers to the hemispherical fibrocement huts installed in the Noisy-le-Grand emergency housing camp to accommodate homeless families who were initially housed in tents.

he knows he is not doing what he should for his family. He thus refrains from making demands. However, he has immediate reasons for not working and for his disinterest in unemployment benefits. They are seemingly trivial: he has nothing to wear, he has not left his house because his child was ill, he was called to the police station for an urgent matter, etc. He states these arguments reasonably and convincingly. Like so many of the poorest, he uses language borrowed from the outside world which he has gleaned from social services, the army and his contacts with charity or social workers. He sprinkles his sentences with stereotypical expressions and uncommon words making it seem he has a respectable background, that life was better when he was young. On the face of it, Robert does not seek to deceive; it is far more subtle than that. He uses the means of communication at his disposal to explain the situation he is experiencing at that time. He lacks the information and experience to judge it objectively by placing it within time and context as a whole. Seeing that Robert also willingly dissociates himself from his poverty-stricken environment, an ill-informed person may easily take him for a “case”, a difficult one perhaps, but a solvable one. If they remain in touch, the observer will ultimately see him as being weak of character or of mind. Be that as it may, Robert, with the instinctive sensitivity of the poor to others' attitudes, will interpret the slightest word, and even the most neutral tone, as a sign of respect, scorn, favour or threat. Communication becomes more and more distorted.

In a way, the Estèves and the Collivauds represent two different kinds of family. Jean Labbens described those that resemble the Estèves as ambivalent, due to their tendency both to comply with and deviate from established norms.<sup>4</sup> Although they break away from each other, and like to identify with families on the same level as the Collivauds, they treat with considerable condescension a third type of family, even poorer than they are. Indeed, at the bottom of the underclass, we find a population which is even more destitute and tends to resign itself to its condition.

We often speak of apathy among the poor. It would perhaps be appropriate to define this notion somewhat better. Seemingly passive, the underclass nevertheless reacts when faced with life's events. It does this in its own way, sometimes by busying itself off the beaten track. Its activities may sometimes escape the attention of the social worker or researcher. The fact remains that part of this population tends to adapt to its subhuman situation. In a way, they settle into it, limiting their activities and aspirations to the most basic level of survival. For this reason, people from their own social circle keep their distance.

The Jamart family found themselves in just such a situation. André Jamart contented himself with the lowliest of jobs. He found it difficult to survive, even at the level of seasonal worker and dustman. When he was not working, he relied on his wits and public assistance for months at a time. He dreamt of finding a steady job as a dustman in Paris; his horizons stopped there. In the meantime, five children were removed from his care for health reasons. The “igloo” temporary housing which was home to his wife and two remaining little boys was falling into ruin. His efforts to avoid its collapse were pathetic improvisations. However, his home suited him: “We don't live in luxury,” he would say, “but it's not too bad either, we aren't on the streets.”

André Jamart appears to be entirely destitute, and his conception of life seems clear. However, even here, dialogue is often based on misunderstanding. Exactly like Robert, André borrows certain words from the outside world, especially from charities he has known since his poverty-stricken childhood in a small provincial town. More impoverished than Robert, his personality is more malleable. He aligns himself with the situation or the person before him at any given moment. This can be seen in his face with its irresolute features and vague expression. André always communicates using the language of the person he is speaking to, even to the extent that it can become annoying. He surprises outside visitors with his

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<sup>4</sup> Jean Labbens, *Principes sociologiques de la promotion sociale de la famille inadaptée*, edited by Bureau de Recherches Sociales, Paris, 1964.

articulate expressions. They are merely the resonating echo of sounds he has heard but never assimilated. Even less than his neighbours, Victor and Robert, does he understand their real meaning. His mind has been fed from the crumbs that fall from the table and has empty spaces, because André has not replaced the badly-assimilated values with others. He uses certain poorly-understood words all the more easily as he does not intend to mislead his listener, but to keep contact with him through what he sees as ritual expressions. They fall within a code of know-how which is part of him and that he cannot relinquish. To have the slightest chance of establishing a real dialogue with him, you must be in the category of closely-related people that the code gives access to, without the need for any specific ritual.

When all is said and done, in the same way as a bad mirror, the poor send back a more or less blurred or distorted reflection of our own image. The few men of good will who seek to approach them find many familiar traits which give them the illusion that this universe is accessible. In fact, they are entering ambiguous situations which, rather than easing, accentuate the marginalised status to which the poor are relegated by those who see only distortion and grimaces in the mirror.

## MARGINALISED STATUS

On other occasions, we have spoken about the characteristics of the relationship which modern society can maintain with the very poor. Society does not generally value a man for what he is, but judges him on unimportant features, such as his looks, intelligence, or professional worth. For this reason, the poor represent a negative element: not only do they have nothing to contribute, but they are conspicuous. Their housing is seen as a national shame; their children, who are slow, create problems in school in the same way that they themselves, professionally worthless, are a problem for the working world.

What is true for a man is all the more true for the group. It is not the living conditions, it is the category itself which is seen as harmful. Even from the political point of view, they are a burden, because they do not generally vote and their presence in the locality, weighing upon the social assistance budget and lowering property values in the area, provides a pretext to blame those in power.

As they are, the poor have neither an individual nor a collective role. Identifying them with their repugnant situation, our first concern is not to enter into contact with them, but rather to push them aside. Society offers them essentially a relationship of individual assistance, and all they must do in return is to use the assistance as required. This creates a situation of personal dependence with no hope of escape. Pushed to the extremities of uselessness, with neither rights nor duties, they are deprived of the means of communication that is indispensable to acquiring some degree of usefulness. The paltry material or social assistance provided in an environment lacking actual experience in ordinary cultural values can only be used to meet immediate, fragmented needs. It does not promote the advancement of the poor, and in turn our society becomes useless to them. In this sense, we can say that this marginalised status completes poverty's vicious circle.

We ourselves experienced this condition, growing up in a poor family on the fringe of a working-class district. Too destitute to be useful, our only method of communication was to accept the individual assistance offered from the outside and, in exchange, to use it according to the intent of those providing the aid. This type of dialogue deprived us of any possibility of advancement. Indeed, from the outset, advancement required a minimum of freedom of thought and action, a minimum social status independent of our personal stature, to allow authentic communication with an active environment. Moreover, given their lack of knowledge about poverty, those we spoke with generally could not even imagine that we might think differently from them or, if they did, they resented it. Questioning those interventions which did not correspond to our deep-seated need for integration and perhaps

even refusing to accept them, meant compromising our only remaining link with a society without which we could not live. Our mother required exceptional courage to refuse the placement of her son in the Auteuil Orphanage. Unable to offer him the means for professional training herself, she was asked to send him away, putting him in the marginal situation of a poor orphan. She was obliged to choose between what she herself deemed to be right for him and the opinions of those with power to ensure her family's future. By making a decision based on her own judgement, she lost the parish's support and interest.

It is readily maintained that the replacement of former charitable organisations with modern social services has completely changed the relationship between society and the poor. Yet nothing confirms this amongst the underclass where we currently live. The content of the assistance has certainly changed, but its individualised aspect remains. However, insofar as the poor are unable to access the rights and duties of a higher class, it is not enough to give them individual significance, for this always remains dependent on their uncertain personal potential. The poor require collective recognition, security, and liberty commensurate with their environment and independent of individual failures which are always an eventuality.<sup>5</sup> Throughout western countries, we advocate means by which families deemed capable of rehabilitation may advance. These methods of providing social assistance, dependent on the character or good will of a particular family, differ in content but not in nature from the former public assistance system or traditional charitable organisations that are now so strongly criticised. These individualised material, social or spiritual approaches are infinitely precious and even indispensable. However, they correspond to a kind of rescue for individuals or families, and do not lead to the social group's integration. They tend to skim off the best of a social stratum rather than break up poverty's vicious circle. By giving individual value to the poor person without introducing him into an appropriately defined group, we isolate and depersonalize him. Here, it seems to us, we find one of the most subtle forms of segregation.

But there are other things which are much more serious. Useless and a burden, the poor are obliged to justify themselves individually. And yet they are incapable of doing so: deprived of the necessary means to communicate, escaping even the subtleties of the scientific researcher, how can they make themselves understood? Suspect, called at any moment to identify themselves, they carry a multitude of documents with them: payslips, certificates of paternity or proof that a child has been taken into care by public authorities, assistance records, etc. They remove them from their pockets at any given moment, a familiar gesture for someone living on the edge. All they have to account for themselves is a pile of ill-assorted personal papers and forms, dirty and worn from repeated handling, but seldom the slightest recommendation. This pathetic gesture is symbolic of those living in poverty, who cannot get society either to recognise them as a class, nor to acknowledge that it has a responsibility towards them. Blamed for the inefficiency of our aid and charity, they are pursued individually to the most marginal places of our society, where they hide.

We have visited outcasts in their homes on the outskirts of Indian villages.<sup>6</sup> Marginal as they remain despite governmental measures, they are entitled to have their status recognised, and to have professions attributed to them. Although reduced to an almost animal-like existence, such as they are, there is a place and a role for them in society. The same can be said for the beggar on the banks of the Ganges. Even if he has no other dignity, he remains a means of sanctification for the non-poor. Each in his own way, the outcast and the beggar have a meaning, a purpose and the right to be what they are. We cannot help but think that the worst sort of poverty has not yet appeared in India. Soon, the most handicapped among the poor will be concerned: unable to enter the technological era with those around them, they will remain outcasts, deprived of even the lowliest social or religious status. What they will gain

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5 On the need of a collective conscience for the poor, see Christian Debuyst, *Principes psychologiques de la promotion de la famille inadaptée*, edited by Bureau de Recherches Sociales, Paris 1964.

6 In 1965, Joseph Wresinski visited India.

materially by gathering up the crumbs which fall from a more abundant table, they will lose socially, their status being no longer recognised nor tolerated.

Herein lies the drama of the western underprivileged. They are never safe from the pressure of individual interventions, a pressure which is accentuated by the fact that it emanates not from individuals but from society's own institutions. Ultimately, these interventions tend to destroy this class by taking in its children. Here, those who have a wealthy society's interests at heart meet those of whom we spoke at the beginning of these pages, who seek to reduce poverty out of respect for the poor. Each in their own way, they often strangle them with their unremitting efforts. In the most developed countries, poverty's vicious circle does not simply tend to keep the poor in their current state but also, ultimately, to destroy them. This circle will only be broken insofar as society establishes a new quality of human relations with the underprivileged.

### A TEAM IN SEARCH OF THE UNDERCLASS

When speaking of new relationships with poverty-stricken people in industrialised countries, we go beyond the notion of poverty which can be dealt with by some simple government measure, some single social service action or charitable gesture made by an organisation, or the more or less passionate commitment of some voluntary activists. We are faced with a problem which can only be resolved through intelligent, clear and lasting solidarity between a society as a whole and its poor. To create relationships of this quality we require, above all, real knowledge.

From an early age, we felt the need to explain how the poor live in a closed world inaccessible to the non-poor. We also wanted to become familiar with this outside world which remained impenetrable to us. This desire for mutual understanding, for genuine communication between the poor and the non-poor, is shared today with teams who have lived among the underclasses for many years. Comprising various professions, citizens from all social classes, men and women from different religious or philosophical backgrounds, these teams have endeavoured to be at the forefront of a society which, at long last, is more realistic and determined to carry the fight into the farthest reaches of extreme poverty. They are the communication channels between two worlds which must connect.

Solidarity is based on knowledge, and such knowledge is only gained by a mutually dependent and lasting presence. It is not gained from the outside, nor from a more or less temporary, more or less passive presence in a disadvantaged environment. To think that the poor will never accept us as one of their own, never open themselves to us and introduce us to their secret world is to misunderstand them. In us, they must find not only the will to be present and to share their living conditions, but also to create an active link between our destiny and theirs.

True knowledge, like the advancement of the poor, stems from this type of presence. A mere disinterested approach, with the research techniques used to date, will not be enough.

Thus, the *Aide à Toute Détresse*<sup>7</sup> teams have endeavoured to engage in a vigorous, lasting commitment, whereby the poor could respond to them in the same way as they themselves responded to the poor. In 1962, Pope John XXIII gave new impetus to their efforts, by calling the Church back to its primary role as the Church of the poor.<sup>8</sup> The poor will rediscover the prominent place which the Church has always held for them, if the Church has that knowledge which is indispensable to recognising them and joining up with them again. From

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<sup>7</sup> *Aide à Toute Détresse* was one of the first names given to what is today the International Movement ATD Fourth World. The term "*Aide à toute détresse* teams" used by the author designates the teams of full-time volunteers who are committed to long-term action in the fight against poverty.

<sup>8</sup> Speech broadcast on Radio Vatican on 11 September 1962, one month before the opening of the Second Vatican Ecumenical Council.

then on, the work of *Aide à Toute Détresse* teams may be part of this great Church movement in search of the poor. They are at the heart of this search, because the Church does not seek out indiscriminately some poor person, or some person suffering from hunger, illness or old age. From time immemorial, its approach has been to seek out the most destitute, those in whom it meets both Christ and all of humanity, and starting from whom it is certain to reach all of the poor.

It is evident that in such an undertaking, science can no longer remain the poor relation of charity. Jean Labbens, who came to share our life with us, understood this. In these initial chapters, he gives some indications which, one day, may be the basis of a genuine sociology of the poor. With his help, *Aide à Toute Détresse* teams begin the work which they hope will be a worthy realisation of the prophecy of John XXIII.