

Why Choose Poverty?

Volunteers' Meeting, October 8, 1963

From Father Joseph Wresinski, "ECRITS ET PAROLES AUX VOLONTAIRES", VOLUME I, 1960 - 1967, pp. 194-202

How do we justify volunteers' poverty? In our Western civilization, poverty has not been valued as something good in and of itself. Only Jesus Christ established it as the ideal state for human beings. Now, volunteers, of course, come from every spiritual persuasion. On what grounds do they assert that their situation must be one of poverty?

Poverty is the condition which does not overshadow the least among our brothers and sisters; it instills trust in them. It enhances their own state and, from that starting point, it enables them to face the world. It helps them to draw out of their own life-style the poise and stability which allow them to welcome in their midsts people even poorer than themselves.

This evening we intend to think about volunteers' poverty. We are often speaking about this, but we sometimes get poverty and human misery mixed up. I do not know if we are fully aware of what we are saying when we talk about poverty. Why and how does poverty come into our lives?

First of all, we must recognize the fact that poverty does not come to us naturally. It is not a natural ingredient, and we cannot state that we want to be poor because the state of deprivation to which poverty subjects us would, in and of itself, be a good and normal state to live in. On the contrary, perfect equality would mean that all human beings should be provided with an equal amount of resources. Some people will say that, if we divided up the earth's resources in an equal way tomorrow, some would invest their share profitably, while others would squander theirs. This is a fallacious argument which does not justify the extremely unequal distribution of resources.

What we ought to consider in this respect is not necessarily the difference between someone who is a multi-millionaire and someone who only has an average income. The unacceptable difference is between people in both of those income ranges and anyone who is living in such a state of deprivation that his/her professional, social and moral existence is jeopardized. This is where the breaking point really lies. Anyone who is stripped of everything in this way is living in conditions of intolerable inequality. Therefore, in relation to this sub-human condition, it is normal that human beings go to all possible lengths to take part in a set of resources which will promote their full participation in society, their education, their intellectual, professional and moral development, and their standard of living from every point of view.

Still, however, as far as we are concerned, we are saying that, for an A.T.D.-volunteer (1), poverty is a necessary and even indispensable state. We are asserting that this volunteer must "live in a state of poverty". On what grounds and with which criteria are we taking our stand? Not the criterion of normality, since we just stated that a situation which is quite the opposite of poverty is a natural one for human beings. We

were saying that it is normal that any person in an "under-resourceful" state be provided with resources. So what is the basis for our assertion?

In a philosophical context, we are once again in an untenable position. Whatever the philosophy toward which we direct our attention in our civilization, whatever the thinking about human beings, we notice that, through the centuries, no famous thinker has recognized poverty as a desirable state, as a transcending of the human condition. The perfection of human beings has always been considered from the point of view of an enhancement of the mind and this latter requires, in all cases, certain means and certain conditions from the start. Furthermore, even in mythology, we do not encounter any god who is poor.

Probably, over the ages, some philosophers have become witnesses to voluntary poverty, but they have been the exception, and it was not poverty in and of itself which they considered as something good. In their opinion, poverty was a condition which made it possible to protest against a society or against a mind-set of which they did not approve. In a more general way, throughout all the eras, the richer a person was, the more he/she was considered as blessed by God. The richer a person was, the closer he/she really was to the Lord.

Of course, for those who believe in Jesus Christ as he reveals himself in the Gospels and in the Church's point of view throughout the centuries, this issue seems to have been turned around. The quality of Christ's very presence in the world manifests his clearly stated determination to make the state of poverty become the ideal state for human beings. All the more so since, when he climbed up on the Cross, Christ showed himself in such a state of abandonment that there could no longer be the least doubt about it. The Cross marked the triumph of an entire life of poverty, and this became the ideal for a Christian. It is not, however, in religious considerations that we, who are not all believers, are going to find a justification for the assertion which we claim as our own. On what grounds are we, who do not all share in the mainstay of a common faith, going to be able to accept and affirm with certainty that the condition of volunteers is one of poverty? Since no philosophy tells us that this condition is excellent, nor calls on us to adopt it, on what are we going to rely? Let's try to think. In the last issue of "Igloos" magazine, Francine wrote that the Volunteer Corps should be "ambivalent". Let's try to see what that means.

We speak about ambivalence whenever someone is at the point of junction between two worlds, and, because of certain values, he/she is to all intents and purposes a part of each of these microcosms. When you are travelling to Belgium and are at thirty kilometers from the frontier, you already feel that you are no longer altogether in France, nor yet altogether in Belgium. Both because of people's attitudes and their way of acting and because of landscapes, you are in between two worlds and people are a part of both.

We can transpose this example. We too are on the boundary line between two worlds, one of poor people and the other of rich people. We are people crossing boundary lines. We must belong to both worlds if we really want to induce the rich to go to meet the poor and to introduce the poor into the world of the rich. If we want poor people to show hospitality to the rich and rich people to show hospitality to the poor, we must have values which are common to both sides, values which will cause each of these worlds to recognize us as belonging to it, as being one of its members and able to speak on its behalf.

Now, what is the essential value which we discover through human misery? Definitely not human misery itself, but rather the state of poverty which confers on human beings simplicity, modesty and an understanding of life's events. The state of poverty is the opposite of opulence, pride and power which overshadows the least among human beings. Our poverty enables people in chronic poverty to recognize us as being a part of their community, to accept us, to listen to us and to grant that we help them to cross over to the other side. Our poverty establishes their trust, because it is the sign of our sincerity and of what we really are: A.T.D. volunteers (1) who want to be as close as possible to families to help them to emerge from their chronic poverty.

From another viewpoint, our poverty has great significance because the choice to live in relative hardship enhances in poor people's eyes their own condition. If they see that we are really having trouble making it, that we put ourselves through sacrifices freely and that our situation is approaching their own, their situation will be reinforced. Since we agree voluntarily to be poor, then poverty as a condition is neither a tarnished nor a shameful one. It probably remains a painful condition, but the poor can believe that it is not an inferior state, not a sub-social, sub-religious, sub-professional one, in a word, a bad state to live in. This seems crucial to me, because I do not believe that anyone can emerge from the condition they are living in unless they have accepted beforehand to use values which are those of their current condition in order to emerge from it. I do not believe that anyone can achieve self-advancement and growth merely by attempting to find within your neighbor what could enable you to move forward yourself. I think that anyone can emerge from their condition to the extent that they will have recognized and taken into consideration the values of their condition and their milieu. This is one of the keys to unlocking doors for a poor person. He/she must be able to use his/her poverty as a stepping-stone right from the beginning.

There is still another important consideration. Whenever a poor person, whose own condition has been held in high esteem, looks at the rich, he/she will no longer consider them so much as his/her superiors. He/she will no longer necessarily see them as people standing in his/her way. If he/she really appreciates his/her own condition, he/she will have many more opportunities to face the outside world, to get in touch with his/her human environment and to make his/her mark in it.

Ultimately, what is the goal which we are setting for ourselves? We are expecting that, in a single movement of reconciliation, the community of poor people crosses over into the community of rich people and that rich people are welcomed in the midsts of the poor. Yet we are also expecting, still in this same movement, that poor people are going to accept the poorest fully. Now, in order to accept someone else, you must feel that you are worth something yourself. You do not accept other people with unselfishness unless you carry inside yourself a certain sense of altruism, of empathy, of self-confidence and, even, of poise. If we want poor people to accept the poor, they must be able to have this sense of poise, of balance and of fulfillment. They will be able to accept the poor when they will have explored all the facets of their own poverty and will have been assured of its value. Then they will be able to consider other poor people close to them, turn their attention toward folks who have sunk even deeper, and welcome them in their midsts. Then the poor will no longer be this kind of partitioned battle field, this battle field torn apart by different interests where, to all intents and purposes, acts of love - contrary to what certain poets think - are as rare as fine, sunny days in the middle of night... .

Here is how I had thought about this question of poverty, by asking myself why it was necessary and in what way it can be justified in our midsts. It is necessary for four reasons. Because it is absolutely impossible for us to be admitted into the world of the poor and to belong to it, if we are not its neighbors at least in this respect. Furthermore, it is necessary because the poor, on seeing that poverty is not a demeaning state since we are choosing it, will be able to experience it and to draw from it the means to emerge from it. Again, poverty is necessary because the poor, seeing that their condition is appreciated, will have many more opportunities to get in touch with their human environment and to face the world. Lastly, it is impossible that poor people accept the poorest with unselfishness unless they themselves form a stable and solid world. Now, no one can be well-balanced unless they do not first put down roots in the milieu which is their own, and no milieu can be well-balanced unless its members are not proud to put down their roots in it.

Here is what I am conveying to you and which you are free to accept or to reject. Poverty is a state of deprivation which we may reject or accept. The tragedy of people in chronic poverty is that this condition is forced upon them. They are not even able to choose material poverty alone, since it is an integral part of other clearly inhuman deprivations.

When our two photographers try not to use too much gas, they are choosing a kind of poverty, since, as a matter of fact, they could have the means to go around the world. This displays a spiritual attitude whose concrete applications are continually at work in everyday life. This spirituality leads to a discipline which, for example, causes us to push ourselves to look for scratch paper so as not to waste nice paper. Quite often the situation of a monk does not seem like an altogether perfect state of poverty, because we do not have the feeling that monks are forced to strive constantly to limit their expenses and their use of resources. This, however, is what choosing poverty is about: a constant striving toward voluntary sacrifices.

This form of poverty throws us into a kind of deliberate tension. We must tell ourselves: "Here are the world's resources. For such and such a reason, I am not taking possession of them, even though I could acquire them." Many people come here saying: "I want to take care of the poor." These people absolutely want to get in touch directly with the families. The first thing to do, however, would be to adopt a discipline and some kind of surrender of resources. People are often seeking to accomplish great things right away, whereas what is needed, in the very first place, is to endeavor, quite plainly, to experience to the best of one's ability the situations in which the poor are living. Poverty is the first prerequisite for getting in touch with these families. I am not talking about human misery which is a state of maladjustment which should not be imitated. Unlike poverty, human misery is not a positive condition.

NOTE:

(1) Quite literally, this means "volunteers to all forms of distress". It derives from the term, "Aide A Toute Detresse", an early name of the Movement, usually shortened to A.T.D. and still used by some national branches [e.g., in the United Kingdom...]. It designated what, before Father Joseph coined the term in 1968, we would now call "Fourth World volunteers". [translator's note]