

Sharing

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What does sharing mean? We were taught about this when I was a child. Even though our family lived in poverty, when anyone knocked on our door to ask for food, I was told to take a piece of bread and a few coins and give them to the person who had knocked. Sometimes our neighbour's son would come over to our house. His mother drank; she was a single parent, and when her son came home from school, he would often find his mother collapsed next to the stove, and the boy, only 13 years old, would lift her up and carry her to bed. My mother would sometimes have this boy over to eat. Occasionally my mother and this neighbour would get into an argument, and my mother had the gratification of being able to say, "...after all that I've done for her..."

There was also a priest who used to come and see us to collect a contribution for the parish, which he did with all his parishioners. But he also visited people who were poverty-stricken, which is what we were, and he sat there and stayed a long time with my mother. For our contribution to the parish, we always gave him 50 centimes. In the evenings, before we went to bed, we used to assemble packets of cigarette papers to make some money, and we would give him some packets and cheat on the final count. That was our way of sharing.

But what was remarkable was that when this priest came to our home and sat down to receive a few centimes and always these little packets of cigarette papers, he stayed at our place for a long time and listened to my mother, with a lot of respect and esteem. Sometimes he would ask questions about our neighbours and even asked my mother to do something for a non-parishioner living on the floor above us. He gave my mother the privilege of being able to share and the possibility of sharing not just anything, but honour and trust.

When we think of people in poverty, is this what we think about? That the person in front of us lives in poverty, not because he lacks something for himself, not because he hasn't got any money, not because he can't invite someone in for a meal, and not because his honour is not recognised; he is in poverty because he cannot give, because he has

nothing to give - no food, no table where he could invite someone to eat with him.

When somebody gave us something, they would say to us, "Keep it for yourselves." People would say to my mother, "This is for your children." I remember, when I was 12 or 13, like all children of families in poverty, I gave everything away, not as an act of charity, but as a reaction to having always received things. I gave everything away, just like that, until I was in my late teens.

I gave everything away because I'd always been on the receiving end, and you get tired of always being on the receiving end. My brother was the same - he gave everything away. When we were children, people didn't let us give things away. They would say to us, "We're giving you these sweets but you haven't got many; they're for you; don't give them to anyone."

When my mother received something, people made sure that she didn't give it away, that she didn't sell it. Basically, when people gave her something, they hadn't abandoned it; they continued to follow my mother through the things that they had given her, as if these things gave them a right of control, a right to oversee my family, a sort of check that she was really putting the gift to good use. And what was the "right" use? They wanted to know whether she had really put the shoes onto her child's feet, even if they were too small. They wanted to know what she had done with this or that, because in the end, they didn't trust my mother. They trusted her only when they saw the shoes on the feet of us children, then they would say around the parish:

"Oh look at that! We can go on helping Mrs. Wresinski because she uses what we give her properly." In other words, she's a "good" poor person, a nice, well-behaved poor person who fits the "poor person" image that we have accepted over centuries and makes us feel comfortable.

The result of that is that my mother could never share anything without justifying it. This is what sharing had become for her: she was forced to lie. When she was offered something, she was forced to say she didn't have the item in question, because if she had admitted to having it, they would have said,

“Well, Mrs. Wresinski, you’ve got some nerve; your neighbour doesn’t have one. So, did you get help from Catholic Aid?” Then they told one another, “She’s already getting help from somewhere else,” and they wouldn’t give her anything else. My mother realised that, and she was forced to lie continually and to say that she had nothing. There were piles of clothing at home that we didn’t know what to do with, because my mother could never say, “No, we don’t need it.”

But the worst result is that people in poverty lose the habit of sharing, and we end up splitting them apart and pitting them against one another. We think that, when people are in poverty, they are not entitled to share, and we are always reminding them to keep what they have; and so they develop a mentality of rejecting one another.

Most of the conflicts we see among people in poverty stem from this problem. We haven’t allowed them to consider people next to them as collaborators and friends, as neighbours with whom they could make a life together. They’re used to seeing others as rivals who are going to get something in their place and who are therefore a threat. This is the only thing that explains the blind hatred that you often see among people who live in extreme poverty - hatred of black people, for example, or of Algerians and other foreigners. This is when you realise that poverty rends apart the people who endure it.

But much more serious is that this lack of sharing and this mentality are carried over to the area of employment. A person who needs work will try to grab the job and the income from the person next to him, saying, “He’s an Arab.” And even worse is the same two people from the same emergency housing camp, who live in the same poverty but who are not close, who know each other vaguely, perhaps as an “Algerian”, but are not friends living next to each other. When they work for the same company, they can’t stay there, because sooner or later, there’ll be a conflict. One will go to the boss or the foreman and denigrate the other, who works alongside him. In order to show himself in a better light, the man with the same background will tell the boss all that his neighbour has done - been in prison, committed theft, started fights, etc. He will do this so that he can keep his job, because deep down, he’s afraid of being denounced in the same way. The refusal to allow sharing among impoverished families means that in terms of jobs as well as in their personal lives, the community is split.

And even more serious, the refusal to share means that people living in poverty become the instruments of religious, political, and economic forces. This vague apolitical, non-religious mass provides a reserve that allows all forms of authoritarianism, at the level of employment, religion, community, and politics. It is this mass that makes it possible for authoritarianism to take root. This man who was not able to show solidarity with his neighbour, with the man next to him, whom he basically rejected when the time came - this man is always there to support someone against his own people.

And these people, who expect nothing from the Church, from politicians, from France, or from anybody, are considered to be the least revolutionary people in the world. But they are also the most nationalistic people in the world; they are the ones who march down to the Bastille, not to support their fellow workers, but to support the government and order - an order they don’t benefit from, an order that goes against their own group and their own neighbours, because the order was built up without any thought that they or their neighbours existed.

Charity means wanting to share with others what we have been given. It’s not just wanting to share; it’s being able to share. There is no charity if people who live in poverty aren’t allowed to be charitable as well, if they’re prevented from sharing with their neighbours, and if they don’t feel a sense of solidarity with them, even if it means losing something. But to achieve that, many things must be dismantled.

First we need to realise that what we give to people in poverty does not belong to us, but belongs to them, with no restrictions. Sharing begins, and the idea of charity begins, when we really feel that we are subject to the will of people in poverty themselves and we believe wholeheartedly that anything we have given them belongs entirely to them.

This is when we’ll be obliged to ask them for help. In closing, just a simple phrase that will be the theme for our work: “It is much better to give than to receive.” Receiving, over the long term, becomes a source of shame. Giving always represents a step forward, because a gift is a sharing of love and honour.
