

Take Justice to Heart

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(Original: French¹)

Addressing members of ATD Fourth World in Heerlen, the Netherlands, on 15 November 1986, Father Joseph Wresinski explained why he suggested the slogan "Take Justice to Heart" for the campaign of 1987, marking the thirtieth anniversary of the founding of the Fourth World Movement. The campaign culminated on 17 October 1987 on the Plaza of Liberty and Human Rights at the Trocadero in Paris with the inauguration of the Commemorative Stone in Honour of the Victims of Extreme Poverty.

"How can people just stand by and watch my children suffer at school without being sick at heart?" "How could his employer be so heartless as to fire my husband?" "How could the social worker be so cold-hearted and so unfair as to accuse me of not being a good mother?" The real pleas coming from families, your pleas, families of the Netherlands, are first and foremost those. "How could they have the heart to hurt us, despise us, humiliate us, and constantly make us feel that we are worth less than nothing?"

"It's not fair; that's what's not fair first of all," you often say, when I see you at Wijhe farm. The first injustice, which should be the first to end, is injustice in the heart. It is that most terrible injustice that makes some people feel superior to others and believe they have the right to despise them.

I am thinking of a Dutch mother from Koevorden who told me how she lived with her parents on a barge when she was a young girl. "It was nice and clean in our home," she told me, "but people from the town didn't believe it. They despised us and thought we weren't clean, and my schoolmates weren't allowed to play with me at home on the barge."

It is that injustice in the heart, that injustice in the way you are looked down on by those around you, that made the young girl, when she later became a wife and mother, understand all the other injustices, those of the laws. She now understands why she and her family have had to live in an apartment that has needed repairs for over ten years. She waits from one year to the next because the town has to save money. It is always the building she is living in that is struck off the municipal budget.

It is blatant injustice because families with more resources get decent accommodation from the town. But this mother understands the origins of this injustice in the administration of the town. The civil servants who process her file at the town hall were children when she was a little girl. And since childhood, they have heard that people living on barges are not clean and that you shouldn't play with the children there. As children, these civil servants had not learned to take justice to heart, which says that every other child is a brother or sister, a friend.

So how could they possibly have justice in their files and in their laws?

This mother I am telling you about, who told us all that so simply, also told me: "I never spoke to anyone about all of those things for a long time. Today, here, I can tell you what I experienced, because here we find people we can talk to."

Human rights are first and foremost a matter for human beings. "People we can talk to", the mother said. And that is what all families who come to Wijhe farm say: "Here, we find people we can talk to."

¹ Unpublished text. Archives, Joseph Wresinski Centre, ATD-CJW 0779/40.

Why can we talk with them? Because they have the deep, powerful desire to listen, to understand, and to share. Because justice is not only in their minds and their words, but also in their hearts. It is the justice that makes you suffer when others suffer. When someone else feels humiliated, you feel humiliated as well.

I would like to tell you a few words about these members of the volunteer corps "whom you can talk to", those whom you rightly refer to as the *permanent workers*. What are they permanent in? They are permanent in taking justice to heart, which means that during the day, they work, interact, and live with families in poverty. Taking justice to heart means that at night, they wake up and are concerned they have not done enough. They are concerned about what has to happen tomorrow for injustice to end in human hearts. Because then, injustice in laws would end. These permanent workers, these members of the volunteer corps, have learned from families of the Fourth World that extreme poverty is the most complete violation of human rights.

For in the Fourth World, there is neither a right to education nor a right to work. There is neither the freedom to choose your home nor the means to freely join an organisation of your choice.

"Other people do not see us; it's as though we don't exist", families in poverty say. And for people who don't exist, what would be their place in our trade unions or political parties, our churches, or our organisations? Extreme poverty is a denial of all human rights, whether political, economic, social, or cultural. The families of the Fourth World and the members of the volunteer corps have learned and understood that together. And you, our allies who came to join us, have also understood that. This has enabled the ATD Fourth World Movement to grow and become stronger as a movement for human rights. But there are many organisations for human rights around the world. Are we different? I think that because of you, the families of the Fourth World, we are not just an organisation like any other. Why? It is because for us, human rights exist only if they are guaranteed to the most deprived, forgotten, reviled, and despised family. And it is because for us, human rights are guaranteed over time only if they are found not just in the laws, but first in the hearts and personal lives of human beings.

Since the end of the Second World War, in the countries of Western Europe, we have made much progress in human rights. No one can deny it. Our countries have adopted sound legislation. But the Dutch, the French, the Belgians, the Germans, and the British have no longer kept the ideal of taking justice to heart. Gradually, they have taken on the conviction that justice could be reduced to a matter of legislation.

And yet human rights first germinated in the human heart. People fought for them because their hearts believed in the nature and unique value of all human beings. And gradually, without our realising it, this matter of people for other people, and this matter of faith and of the heart became a matter merely of political and judicial structures of our societies.

It is because of this that our hearts no longer reacted when we saw a family living in a hovel, when we saw deeply unhappy children who had been rejected and thrown into special classes. Our hearts no longer accommodated justice, and we came to find it bearable that parents, children, and workers were living in distress. We often ended up despising them because of their distress, or condemning them because they did not benefit from our laws.

The calling of ATD Fourth World is to remind people of the true history of human rights. Families who live in extreme poverty remind us that we should take up the thread of this history of an ideal born in the heart of human beings because they loved humanity. Human rights are a matter of the heart, of faith, and of civilisation. It is a matter for every person. Men and women who believe that it is their business, their lives' cause, constitute the volunteer corps – men and women to whom families in poverty feel they can tell

of all the suffering inflicted by the injustice of the heart, which is greater than the suffering inflicted by the injustice of the law.