

# THE FOURTH WORLD AND NON-VIOLENCE<sup>1</sup>

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## PREAMBLE

The subject which you have invited me to speak about is “The history of the Fourth World and non-violence”. We could turn this into the following question: the people of the Fourth World consider that their situation is unjust and that it constitutes a violation of human rights, and thus, a form of violence. The question is therefore: is a man ravaged by poverty capable of peace and brotherhood? I would like to share with you the answers which come from Fourth World families themselves.

To understand these answers properly, I believe we should first very briefly recall the ancestral violence inflicted upon the poorest. After a quick reminder of some examples of the violent treatment meted out to the most destitute throughout history, I shall attempt to outline their reactions, reactions which ATD Fourth World teams have seen in the poverty-stricken areas where they strive to share in the lives and hopes of these families.

Among these reactions and responses to the fate they suffer, I shall highlight three. When Fourth World families are faced with obstacles, their first reaction towards their oppressors is what we will call "*evasion*". The second response we will call "*individual non-violent confrontation*". And the third will be called "*shared conscious and active non-violence*", a process the families may think about together and therefore, also, implement together.

Everything I am about to tell you was learnt by ATD Fourth World from the sufferings of extremely poor families in France during the 1950s. We learned from the suffering of real families, exhausted from living in slums, shanty towns and rudimentary huts, exhausted from living with hunger, underemployment and material poverty, but above all, scorned, humiliated and afraid of their neighbours – neighbours who, little by little, were leaving the torments of war behind and entering the welfare society.

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It was the very fact of finding it unbearable that families should suffer so much, both from countless material deprivations and from contempt, which drove us - first a few of us, then a growing number - to seek to live and share with them. We did not do this to bring them food and clothing, but rather to share in their suffering, to understand it from within and, with them, to transform this suffering into honour and hope. Clearly, we would never have become their friends, nor they ours, if we had never come to live with them. It was sharing the misery of contempt which revealed to us that the history of the poorest is a history of violence.

## **A VIOLENT DESTINY**

First of all, we must no doubt recall that our western societies include ancestral lineages of the very poor, who, throughout history and its succession of societies, have been relegated from father to son to the lowest rung of the social ladder. Relegated to the lowest position in the world, where families - in fact, entire populations - have become the perfect victims for all forms of violence. They form, as it were, a bottom level of humanity which remains stable, representing the permanence of this category throughout all changes and periods. This bottom level of stable families passes on their collective memories, which may be either vague or aware and sophisticated. The Fourth World has such memories in the same way as any other community.

I point out these things simply for us to bear in mind that the Fourth World is living an ancestral history, which, because of the transmission of poverty, is by definition a history of violence. The fact that the well-to-do have not written about, or taken into account, this history does not mean that the most deprived do not carry it within themselves, that they are not marked by it in their minds and bodies, in their deep-seated attitudes and in their daily actions.

A memory of violence, yes, but in what forms does it appear? I shall set forth only a few quick images here, some general views, simply to give us a picture of the poorest people of our times. Today, they are the heirs to a history that is heavy with oppression and brutality, and perfectly consistent in its continuity. Let us recall how poverty has been present throughout the ages, particularly in our western societies. First of all, we have knowledge of poverty thanks to those who, all through history, have stood up to alleviate or even destroy it. Though we lack knowledge of the victim's stories, we know - at least in part - those of their defenders.

Thus, we know that poverty was sometimes wandering and rootless, while sometimes it was scattered throughout the countryside, starving, silent, and still, and sometimes it was crammed into teeming, noisy, insalubrious districts in the cities. We shall talk later about how, today, extremely poor families are driven away, mixed, scattered and pushed together, always in arbitrary fashion and by force. However, it is not only today: the poorest have been paying the price of urbanisation since the Middle Ages.

Throughout history, the Fourth World has paid the price both for shortage and for abundance. They have paid the price for the modernisation which has led to greater material well-being for others, and they have paid the price when lean years strike all. When neighbourhoods decline, they are driven back into the slums. They have borne the brunt of the rise of middle class values, the expansion of the cities when they found themselves evicted and not allowed to remain within the walls of the cities after nightfall. There were also centuries during which

they were confined to asylums, poorhouses, workhouses, not to mention the isolated ghettos and the "*cours des miracles*". All forms of urbanisation have been a type of violence against the poor.

Sickness has also joined these brutal measures. The poorest were the ones affected by the plague as well as by all other epidemics and infectious diseases, since they lived in the most crowded conditions and were the least resilient. Added to this were wars and major famines, because the poorest are also the troops, mobs, rank and file, the small-fry, the instruments of our wars. They leave widows and orphans in the villages, in the hovels to which they return crippled, unable to earn a living for their families. They are also, of course, the first to die in large numbers when famine ravages the country.

Consider the Hundred Years' War, which led to disorder, famine and the destruction of all parish and community foundations. Consider the Napoleonic wars, when the poorest became a nation of men returning to their impoverished homes on crutches, a nation of widows without support, of children roaming the streets and the countryside. They are the people who suffered the worst of these wars, because they lost everything, even their families, the final stronghold against poverty. Losing the cohesion of family life is a serious matter for everyone. For the poorest, it means the loss of their final defence against the destruction of individual dignity.

Are we aware that today, some of the descendants of those poor families of bygone days are to be found in underprivileged housing estates and among the long-term unemployed? Thus, over the years, the absence of free choice with regard to one's place of residence continues, as do the control by the affluent over the lives of the very poorest, the lack of protection against all kinds of disasters and that total dependence on other men and on nature which destroys any attempt to prove one's worth and any possibility to defend one's family. And we must add ignorance to all of this, this scourge which now, as ever, completes the vicious circle of extreme poverty. Ignorance, the lack of access to essential information, education and professions means that the poorest are always exploited, underemployed and, ultimately, unemployed.

Here, we find the disparate components which in fact create a coherent and unbroken destiny. This is what makes people and their memories what they are today. Of course, I have given you only a superficial overview of this population's past, this population which has become a nation through the force and violence of its history. What was important for me was to give you a quick introduction to this singular nation, which has a unique experience of the conscious or unconscious violence of which men are capable. From them, we learn a lesson much repeated over time, that so long as the poor remain at the bottom of our social ladder, our societies will not be based on peace. Rather, peace will belong only to some, and will continue to be a selective peace.

## **NON-VIOLENCE AS EVASION**

We thus find ourselves at the heart of a population which has been violently mistreated in the name of our housing and urbanisation policies, but also in the name of all of our other policies, whether they concern schools, employment, resources or health, or even in the name of the proper functioning of institutions created to implement these policies.

Moreover, since their creation, our western democracies have not taken into account the opinions and voices of this population, a population which has remained at the bottom of the social ladder. It is not represented, nor is there any intention that it should be. Lacking the means to conform to norms established for other citizens, how can the Fourth World avoid becoming a defenceless victim of the arbitrary decisions imposed upon it and in which it has played no role? This is all the more so because these families confuse, disrupt and exasperate the institutions and those around them. They defy them and in some ways provoke them. How can we avoid the mistake of wanting to educate them by force, to require them to “keep on the straight and narrow?”

And yet what can the poor, defenceless man, who is controlled and pursued by our good and not-so-good intentions, do, other than slip away? Indeed, it seems that the poorest are wary of offering any open resistance to the social worker, the priest or the neighbours, for example. On the contrary, they strive to avoid confrontation by seeking to hide their tracks.

In this way, if parents are criticised for not sending their children to school, the mother will attempt to divert the question: “Look at my child, he’s well fed! You can’t say the same of every kid on the housing estate”. Avoiding or evading confrontation are ways to catch out the person you are talking to by talking about something else: “My child does not have everything he needs; we are too poor, but at least he has a mother; I didn’t.” Thus we witness them using daily a thousand ways to sidestep the issue when faced with someone they know to be stronger. For example, rather than talking about the present for which he faces criticism, a father will change the subject to the future. “Computers” he will say, “that’s all it’s about nowadays. It’s the future.” Prevaricating, making deals, changing the subject – parents also do this by asking the child to join in: “Tell them what you had for dinner yesterday!” This way they make use of their children, and push them to the fore.

But this child intermediary, a means of evasion, is also a child who is treated as an adult. Take Martine for example. At the age of nine, she was sent to the bailiff. She had to promise him that the family would pay its arrears, in order to delay the seizure of their property for several days or weeks. Forced to avoid confrontation and violence by hiding behind their children in this way, parents, nevertheless, feel profound suffering. In fact, all these diversions and evasion, while saving the family from immediate breakdown, are paid for by shame. For example, it means that you have to allow your family to be tarnished. Take the case of the woman who, for fear of seeing her husband lose his job, swallows her pride and remains silent when the boss to whom she has come to excuse his absence replies: “So much the better, that’s one day less to pay that good for nothing bloke!” Other parents say nothing when the teacher tells them that their son will never amount to anything, that he will only ever become a delinquent.

Numerous Fourth World adults thus swallow their resentment when the social worker gives them advice, when a teacher lectures them, or when they stand silent before the judge. They are afraid to say what they think. They know only too well that, whatever they do or say, they will be wrong. Sometimes, later, they will say: “I got the better of the judge, I answered yes to everything he said!”... “Those people aren’t going to order me around in my own house!” The women say: “No social worker is going to tell me how to raise my kids. Look how many I’ve got!” A father asserts: “No teacher is going to scare me!” In this way the poorest exercise non-violence by increasing their evasion tactics, avoiding anything which might provoke a confrontation and prevent them from living in a semblance of peace.

Those who do not know the world of poverty may think that this is a form of cowardice or fear. It is true that the poorest tremble before those with power and, above all, the means to oppress and exclude them. In their experience, there is nothing to be gained from complaining to these people. Therefore, their evasion is a survival tactic, even if it is only to gain a semblance of peace. Among themselves, to me, and to our full time volunteers, they acknowledge: "Whatever I say, I'll always be wrong, so I'd rather keep quiet. I don't want to let them insult me. And I want to keep my children, so I keep quiet."

All in all, Fourth World families are lucid and perfectly aware of their vulnerability. It is so easy to criticise the humble, to make fun of their ignorance, to make them pay for their disobedience. That was what happened to Mrs Da Silva, sentenced to 17 years in prison for attempting to commit suicide with her child. She knew that, regardless of what she said, her desperate gesture could not be understood. It was better to remain silent, to avoid any speeches, and let disaster run its course.

It goes without saying that this semblance of tranquillity obtained from escape, humiliation and silence totally paralyses the very poorest. Their non-violence creates neither dignity nor peace. It is a last resort for those who understand only too well that, in reality, it is only their silence which is really allowed: "You can speak when you're spoken to. I'm the one who does the talking here; you know nothing, so keep quiet!"

We can understand this complaint which we hear continually: "I would like them to understand, I would like them to leave us alone, I would like them to respect us." What a heart-rending lesson these families give us in such simple words! They never cease to establish links between understanding, respect and peace. The poor do not seek a peace which consists in ignoring them. Rather, they demand peace which includes understanding and respect – a peace which means brotherhood and dignity for the poor.

## **NON-VIOLENCE, HOW THE POOREST SHOW TOLERANCE AS INDIVIDUALS AND THEIR METHODS OF ENCOURAGING TOLERANCE IN OTHERS**

Nevertheless, this non-violence, which borders on self-destruction, is not the only response. There is another feeling in these families which makes them refuse to meet violence with violence. They express this feeling when they say: "What can you expect, they can't understand, they've never known anything like it! They have jobs, they have money."

This tolerant attitude of the poorest towards the wealthy is well-summarised in the words of a child: "What we need is for the rich to come and live here. We'd go to their places; then later, we would give back their houses and that way, they would know what it means to live like us..." These are not merely the words of a child. They are the expression of the very core of the poorest's thoughts and instincts. The poorest have not taken part in the struggles of the working classes because they have always been too poor to participate and to have their share of memories and workers' pride. But they have their own pride - another pride - and other memories.

It is not cowardice on their part either, if they resume contact with a neighbour who has denounced their child to the police. And if that surprises you, their excuse will be, "It's true that our children can be rough! Sometimes, we're fed up with them ourselves." And the father or mother might add, "In any event, we have to make peace if we want to live!"

Often, the wealthy do not understand this habit of reconciliation or restoring peace after an event like a fight in a café, qualified as a “drunken brawl,” but which is, in fact, the expression of an infinite accumulation of exasperation and hopelessness. The well-off do not understand these men who can be fighting one minute and working together the next to repair a bicycle, or a motorcycle, or a car. They do not understand this man who recommends to his boss that his neighbour be hired, although they are on bad terms. “Because,” he will say, “he and his kids have got to eat!”.

Who can understand? Nevertheless, it all becomes clear if we consider this craving, this thirst for peace in the hearts of the poorest. It is there, deep down, in the families from underprivileged housing estates. Each family in its own way is driven to action to respond to it in one way or another. Each family is also pulled along by the wish for peace which drives his neighbours with the same intensity. One cannot live in close proximity to others without seeing and suffering their pain. It is not surprising then to see a neighbour, though hungry himself, placing a packet of food at the door of the family across the way.

Underlying all of this is the families’ need for others. To save your dignity, to remain respectable in your own eyes and in the eyes of your children, you must be appreciated and respected by your neighbours, and for that, you must make yourself useful. Hence this haunting need to get on with the people who happen to be your neighbours.

We have understood that the poorest did not choose their neighbourhood. The policy of state-subsidised housing requires the very poor from different cultures to live together, without providing them with the means to do so in mutual respect. Can we imagine what it means for exhausted men and women to have noisy, rowdy neighbours in a housing complex where you can hear every sound they make? To have to accept, as a neighbour, a man who has just been released from a prison sentence for stealing or for raping your own eight-year old daughter!

Added to this need to get along with one’s neighbours is the need to live in harmony with a larger circle of people. The poor have not chosen this circle either. Fourth World families cannot choose their children's school. They have no choice with regard to health care; they must go to the health centre in their area. They cannot choose their social worker, nor complain about the one attributed to them.

In short, as a member of the underprivileged population, you must accept the families with whom you live. In one way or another, they need you, and you need them. You cannot but accept them. If not, life would no longer be possible. Likewise, you must also accept those from the outside world with power over you and your children, otherwise, you know that you will achieve nothing; therefore, you must live with them with a minimum of mutual agreement.

I can still see that man at the cemetery last July: his nine year old daughter was hit by a car on the pavement while she was out walking. The child died. After her burial, the father said to me: “You understand, I wanted to strangle the bastard who killed my daughter! But when I got to the police station and I saw that it was a disabled woman, I couldn't say anything. I thought that it must have been awful for her as well to have killed my child. We cried together, and I told my wife that we had to forgive. But believe me, it’s hard!”

As for the harmony to be gained at all costs with regard to the surrounding society, let us try to understand this need in more depth. The poorest must find peace with the world around them because life has deprived them of their identity and their rights. They are not recognised as subjects of rights and they lack the means to assert themselves as such.

Fourth World families, when they become aware that they are deprived of all their rights, have only one effective way to be recognised despite everything, one ultimate, absolute weapon: to display their extreme poverty and the suffering it entails: look at me, feel what I feel, and you will understand me and will not be able to refuse to lend me a helping hand.

The poorest members of society have experienced this, and they know how to use their extreme poverty, not to fight but rather to call for brotherhood. It would be wrong to think that they could not rise up - they have already done this throughout history! What most often prevents them from doing so is a senseless thirst for recognition, to be recognised as a brother, as a man: "If only people would learn to give each other a hand," as they say in underprivileged housing estates. Therefore, in order, to secure recognition for themselves, they highlight their extreme poverty, knowing that it speaks for itself and that it forces their listeners to do some soul-searching. They do not do this by displaying humiliating facts, as the public services ask them to, but by expressing their suffering.

In this way, an unemployed man or a husband on the streets with his wife and children explains his suffering in order to obtain support or assistance. To secure a roof over his head, the man on the streets describes his wife's illness in detail, or the large number of brutal men who came to clear out their home and throw them onto the streets: "They broke the stove, and put our mattress out on the pavement in the rain..." Another man, coming to beg for help at the city hall, carries his four year old child in his arms.

They do not say that their rights have been trampled. Rather, they say: look how we suffer, help us. In this way they lay down their burden at the feet of public assistance officials. An eleven year old child came to see me one day with a handwritten message from her mother asking for some money to buy bread. I tried to send her away saying: "It's up to your mum to come and see me!" But the girl answered: "And what about me? Don't I have the right to eat?"

That ultimate weapon which is extreme poverty and attracts pity, is the lament of the poor. That can give rise to charity and perhaps even mutual aid and solidarity, and they know it. Have they no shame, many wealthy people will say, have they no idea of their rights, a lack of pride? But, it is far deeper than that. As the Fourth World knows, and as its grandparents already knew from experience, when one is too poor, rights are of no consequence. There is nothing left but to hope for pity. The poorest know from experience that even human rights only have value for those who are recognised as human beings. They have no value for those suspected of being sub-human, inferior, or worthless. They know that the last bastion of man is not the rights written down in declarations and constitutions. Rather, it is forgiveness, love, justice and peace founded upon love.

Whether it be in a slum district of Glasgow, an underprivileged housing estate in Marseilles, or a dilapidated estate in Basel, the only peace is that which the residents create among themselves, because - as I have already said - they are forced back into agitation, dispute, and violence against one another. All the same, in order to live - to find the milk you need from a neighbour, to find a neighbour to help drive your wife to hospital - it is necessary to forgive the fights and the back biting of the previous day. Without forgiveness, without tolerance, life

is not possible in an overcrowded, disreputable housing estate. They will say: "You have to understand him, he's violent, and he knocked me around. But he doesn't have a job and he's been turned down for unemployment benefit. He loved his wife and she left him."

But this personal tolerance, forgotten on an excessively difficult day and remembered the next, turns against those who live in this way. "What instability, what inconsistency", say the social workers and neighbours. "One day they're at daggers drawn and then, the next day, they're friends again," they say, mocking them. In actual fact, it is an impossible search for peace, the most desperate there is, because it is not recognised as such, but is, rather, scorned, ridiculed and considered of no account.

It is a search for peace and brotherhood, which can even be considered a dangerous one if it remains a personal strategy for securing immediate relief, because it maintains the status quo of the false relationships which exist between the rich and the poor. Our response will be gestures of pity which stop short of brotherhood - soup kitchens, clothing distribution, sharing of surplus goods, "Christmas butter" and milk for children at the school canteen - what does milk at school mean if the schools do not change to ensure the education of children suffering extreme poverty? What does "night soup kitchen" mean in Paris if the next day we refuse to offer them professional training? What do the shelters and emergency drop-in centres mean if, afterwards, we do not offer them the security of a roof over their heads, employment and the means to support themselves?

I said that human rights mean nothing to the very poorest without love, and without the unshakable respect of their fellow men. However, in the same way, love which is merely skin-deep pity and does not recognise the human rights of the very poorest, leaves them without brotherhood, in a damaging state of inferiority, powerless against humiliation. This false love will break a man, even more so than hunger.

It is for this reason that the personal search for peace is dangerous for the very poorest. The sort of non-violence which changes the world leads families to take a stand *together*. It is conscious, collective and active. It is this non-violence, which is also taking seed in the Fourth World, which I would like to talk about next.

## **NON-VIOLENCE, A SHARED CONSCIOUSNESS**

Non-violence, the search for love and unity among men, is found at the heart of these families who are defenceless against violence. It is this non-violence, a project for humanity, that I must speak of.

If you will allow me, I shall tell you a story where the facts show how evasive non-violence and personally tolerant non-violence can become something else. Firstly, I shall take some examples from our own experience in an area on the outskirts of Paris. You may know that in the 1960s there was strong debate and even refusal and revolt, in response to the profusion of slums and, in particular, the Noisy-le-Grand emergency housing camp for homeless families. It was during the course of these debates that the word "injustice" was pronounced for the very first time. With the ATD Fourth World teams, this word was taken up by the residents of these poverty-stricken sites, which included the Noisy-le-Grand camp, "La Cerisaie" emergency housing estate in Stains and the two vast slums in Saint-Denis and La Courneuve. We then found ourselves in a great muddle of violent reactions. It was as if, in that

heterogeneous world of poverty comprising the homeless - underprivileged French families, foreign workers, repatriated families from North Africa and families of nomadic origin - everyone had suddenly decided that there was only one possible reaction: revolt.

It was a time of great hardship, firstly in the Noisy-le-Grand camp. Over 250 French families were still housed there, either from different regions in France or repatriated from Algeria. Some families had been in a situation of extreme poverty for several generations: illiterate, underemployed, in poor health and living by their wits. Others were not so broken and not all families were equally defenceless. Nevertheless, everyone was housed identically in small twin fibrocement sheds. Each shelter measured 8.40 metres by 5.20 metres. Families with 7 or 8 children were packed into these small spaces, poorly protected in the winter and with the children becoming dehydrated in the summer. Every year, they spent many long months in hospital as a result of these miserable living conditions.

Suddenly, a wave of violence swept through this undernourished population in their insalubrious conditions. I have just described the continuous evasive manoeuvrings, established by many as part of the art of survival. I have already spoken of their tolerance, their continually renewed indulgence. But, suddenly, they burned down their own community facilities which had been built with such difficulty and patience. A children's playground was burnt down. A small shack which housed an office and application files for social support was ransacked. The number of thefts multiplied, a warehouse was looted. Frenzied men and women attacked the mayor and municipal employees. Some suddenly claimed to be associated with actions on behalf of French Algeria.

While all this was going on, in order to protect me, as a priest, living among them, men armed with rifles began night patrols of the area around the shack where I lived. It was a chaotic atmosphere, at the heart of which the full time volunteers found themselves completely disoriented. It took some time to distinguish the true revolt from the false one. The true revolt was led by families known as *Pieds noirs* - French people born in Algeria – who were followed by some working class families. The false one was a clumsy rebellion by families in extreme poverty.

I shall never forget the stream of men and women, who lived from salvaging scrap iron and rags and were accustomed to frequenting the rubbish dumps, coming to tell me: "Father, this has to stop. This is no way to live... Father, tell the people who are setting fire to everything that they must leave!"... "Father, if we leave here to find peace, will you come with us?" "You'll see, you'll be fine, we'll build a shack just for you!"

That morning and the weeks that followed were among the most decisive moments in the awareness and creation of the identity of the ATD Fourth World Volunteer Corps. At the heart of all this violence, the Volunteer Corps witnessed and could adopt this growing awareness of the poorest families: we do not want violence, we want peace. The families themselves, through the experience of a few incredible months, could weigh up and tell each other, and us, what they thought about this form of violence which had been proposed by those stronger than themselves.

Several years later, in 1968, the families of "La Cerisaie" sent us an identical message. Its population was too poor to be taken into account by the great movements of the period. At a time when strikes were the norm and rebellion was raging in the universities, no one came to tell them that they, too, should rise up. This population, nevertheless, knew what was happening in the nearby slums inhabited by migrant workers, who all had jobs, unlike in "La

Cerisaie", where 80% of the men were unemployed. Violence took root in the tremendous frustration resulting from not being taken into consideration by anyone. Among the poverty-stricken places in the Paris area, "La Cerisaie" became the home of despair. Violence came, but, this time, it was directed against the only outsiders present in the camp: the ATD full time volunteers! Day and night, for weeks and weeks, they were harassed and robbed, and their accommodation was damaged. Finally, they, too, found themselves faced with completely bewildered men and women saying: "This is not what we wanted... We wanted to know if you, at least, would be on our side; if you, at least, would stand by us."

I shall not dwell on the story of the slums which were known as "La Campa" in La Courneuve and "Les Francs Moisisins" in Saint-Denis. At "La Campa", there were more or less violent exchanges between the residents and the police, and with the employees who were periodically instructed to bulldoze the makeshift shelters. However, the Spanish families who set the tone for this slum had no experience of the French workers' class struggles. Too poor, too isolated, too threatened by the revocation of their work and residence permits, their violence only came in angry outbursts when facing a bulldozer or a police officer in riot gear.

At "Francs Moisisins", a slum of more than 5,000 people, mainly Portuguese, general violence did not take hold because of the rural origins of the majority of the families, with their typical cautiousness and common sense. For them, too, all this commotion was harmful and dangerous. As a mark of their determination to defend themselves using the few weapons at hand – shovels and pickaxes – the Portuguese stood guard for several nights, fearing that the students from Nanterre would set fire to their slums as a sign of solidarity with the working class.

So there was rejection of violence by very poor populations, although it was certainly not yet a genuine plan for non-violence. But, at this point in history, the very poorest were faced with situations in which violence was not simply a temptation or an individual instinctive reaction to the hardships imposed upon them. The opportunity for collective violence was offered to them. Elements from outside their environment were encouraging them to resort to collective action against society. The ATD Fourth World teams witnessed the fact that, when faced with the possibility of engaging in a certain kind of struggle, the poorest, after a period of distress, said no! "No! We want things to change, but not that way!"

In truth, the change was twofold. "We want things to change," said the families. After re-reading the full time volunteers' observation reports from that time, I believe I can say that the use of the expression "we, the families of the housing estates," emerged almost unnoticed between 1960 and 1968, and then became increasingly evident, firstly in their vocabulary. The very poorest became aware that they could say "we". It was now established that France had acknowledged at the very least the injustice of their housing conditions. It was no longer a question of charity, as it had been ten years earlier, but of rights and justice. The poorest now possessed a right! Through this recognition, although it was still tenuous, underprivileged families were finally given their place among those ranked as having rights, and could begin to see themselves as a group. They could assert themselves as people, as families, as a group, worthy of rights. As a consequence, they were deemed to be honourable and no longer had to hide that they belonged to this group.

This "we" was the first benefit gained during these turbulent years and it made a second realisation possible: "We want change, but we don't want it through hate, hostility and violence". A shared consciousness was born. It remained to be seen what changes they desired and what paths they would follow.

## NON-VIOLENCE, A FIGHT FOR PEACE BETWEEN ALL MEN

I was speaking of the growing awareness in the broader context of the families. In France, providing housing for all was no longer a question of compassion but a human rights challenge. I think the presence of the Volunteer Corps inside the housing estates greatly helped to prepare underprivileged families to adopt this change for themselves as well. For, what had these full time volunteers done if not demonstrate their conviction in every possible way that these families, their relations and their ancestors, victims of extreme poverty for so long, deserved every honour? When you know you have an honourable background, you are no longer inordinately surprised to learn that you have rights.

Discovering one's dignity and honour, discovering one's honourable roots, becoming aware that every person, no matter how broken they are by extreme poverty, possesses inalienable dignity, dissipates the violence in these places of poverty. When we see ourselves as respectable, *together*, we can also find ourselves to be intelligent and very knowledgeable about this extreme poverty which never ceases to provoke violence. We learn to reason together. And when we know how to reason, we know how to convince others. "When we talk we don't fight," concluded one of the most violent men in a housing estate near Paris one evening.

From that time on, the use of language to explain *together* this extreme poverty, a poverty which is not personal but experienced by an entire population at the bottom of the social ladder, was continued in writing. In the Noisy-le-Grand camp, the families joined forces to secure the destruction of that unhealthy ghetto. Every week, for several months, they sent a letter of complaint to General de Gaulle, the President of France at that time. They outlined in turn, each in his or her own way but by mutual agreement, their suffering, their extreme poverty, their unemployment and their children's illnesses. They called for the construction of a housing estate where children and adults could live decently at last. Once they had obtained this victory, some families even refused to be among the first to be rehoused, wanting to be sure that everyone, and above all, the very poorest, would get housing.

In this way the Noisy-le-Grand families used as a power of persuasion their extreme poverty, the state of abandonment and suffering imposed upon them for more than ten years or, more precisely, since time immemorial. They used it as their final weapon, to force the government to take them into account and offer new ways of living in dignity. The difference from the past is that they were now speaking with one voice. Already, they had found a way of leading a collective non-violent project.

But yet another watershed moment came in the 1960s. It was of dual importance, because firstly, by consolidating their identity, the families had come to choose a name for themselves. "We are the Fourth World"... "We, the people of the Fourth World," they would say from that moment on. Indeed, among the many possible periods of history, the families had chosen to go back to the story of Dufourny de Villiers, defender of the poorest. On the eve of the Revolution in 1789, this man had recalled the existence of a Fourth Estate: the sacred order of the Kingdom's wretched poor. He collected journals of grievances and demanded representation for the Fourth Estate alongside the nobles, the clergy and the Third Estate. The families identified with this, finding special connections. "That's us," they said. And that is how the "Fourth Estate" became the "Fourth World."

The second bonus resulting from this turning point was the realisation that "we, the Fourth World" was no longer be restricted to "we, of Noisy camp" or "we of Cerisaie." Their

horizons had broadened, extending to include the region, France, Europe and, as early as 1963, the United States and India.

Already at Noisy, through the weekly letters to the President of France, the Fourth World families were drawing attention to the risks for democracy of accepting injustice, pointing out how democracy belittles itself when it considers the abandonment of the weakest as being an inescapable necessity linked to any plans for the future. While presenting themselves empty-handed, neither shouting nor threatening, they were reintroducing and rehabilitating all poor people in the democratic consciousness.

The same weapon was chosen by the residents of "La Campa" slum at that time: their extreme poverty, their suffering and the contempt in which they had to live. There again, the strategy was established by common accord, without much discussion. Their slum was built along a main road used by thousands of vehicles, morning and evening. They decided to tie placards about their situation to the trees lining the road: "Here, 3,500 people live in the mud, including 2,000 children!" Every evening, at nightfall, the police came and tore down the boards and destroyed them. Yet, all that was on these signs was the extreme poverty in which 3,500 people lived, including 2,000 children. They did not even call for justice, but merely dignity. Every morning, the men, women, young people and children from the slum returned to hang new placards on the trees. This situation continued until the day the director of the *Fonds d'Action Sociale* (a government administrative agency for funding social welfare programmes for immigrant workers) agreed to place "La Campa" on the list of slums whose families were to be rehoused on a priority basis.

At "Francs Moisis" in Saint-Denis, families opted for a similar and, perhaps, even more original strategy. In order to present their hopeless situation, they decided to conduct an investigation, assisted by a small team of ATD researchers. This investigation, led by the families themselves, interpreted official statistics in terms of human suffering. This investigation was both an achievement and a challenge since, for the administrative authorities, this shanty town of more than 5,000 men, women and children did not exist! Located on wasteland, it did not in effect have a postal address. In order to receive their mail, the residents rented mail boxes "in town", as they said. An astonishing result of this daring non-violent procedure was that the *Fonds d'Action Sociale* contributed to covering the costs of this research, whose results could not presumably be a source of delight for any administration!

Did the results prove that the families of Noisy, Stains, Saint-Denis and La Courneuve were right? No doubt they did, because, during the 1960s, the meetings of Fourth World adults gradually turned into the People's Universities, where, among other things, underprivileged people learn public speaking, and discuss such questions as peace and justice together. They could have become political meetings, destined to set man against man and poor against rich. Instead, the families created their University, where speech served the development of new knowledge, which they worked out together, thus founding a basis for unity and peace. Peace among themselves, but also peace with all who oppressed them.

They invited the General Director for Employment, a Director of National Education and many other public officials to their evening meetings. These people's universities are sometimes held in cellars or shacks, sometimes in straw huts or even in prisons. Today, they have spread throughout the world, and are the direct descendants of what began unheralded in the outskirts of Paris.

It is from these universities set up in places and streets where no other university would ever dream of establishing itself, that arose another truly international initiative towards peace, which quickly became worldwide: that of the great gatherings that we have gradually developed into landmark events in the course of these families' lives. Held periodically, they are popular events, genuine human rights celebrations, when families cross borders and oceans to get together and discuss what they have thought about and built together in their local and regional universities. The universities and these historic international events have always had a dual nature:

- they are festive days for the families, and take place in peace and joy,
- they represent a hand outstretched towards other citizens.

Since it is true that for the very poorest there is no class, political party or profession to be favoured, all civil servants, politicians, professionals from every field and simple citizens from every social, religious and political horizon are welcome here. Because not one of them has really made the last come first; none has placed them permanently at the centre of his interests. That is why the poorest are, in essence, the rallying force for all. They can be the point around which all can unite because, on the one hand, Fourth World families themselves, in all honesty, cannot have any preferences; they have an equal need for everyone. And on the other hand, all of their fellow citizens, whoever they may be, have a long way to go to truly join with the poorest.

The poor families have taught us all this by letting us experience it first-hand, and it is in this way, by means of a progression which we ourselves have not yet finished analysing, that the families and full time volunteers have created a Movement to fight against poverty, with the very poorest as the main players. This Movement could only be a march towards consensus and peace.

## **NON-VIOLENCE, A SUCCESS IN ITSELF**

I would like to say one final word on the essential condition which made this story possible, and on the fruit that it has borne. These families have also taught us, day by day, that joint, active, freely-chosen non-violence, non-violence as a project for humanity, represents an incalculable risk for them. This risk can only be contemplated if others commit themselves and dedicate their lives to acting with them.

By not engaging in open battle, and even by forgiving the unforgivable, the very poorest are our teachers, and the first injustice is that there are few of us who tell them so. As a priest, I cannot help but think that my first task is to tell the poor that they are blessed. They are blessed because they are the craftsmen of peace. My first duty is to tell the most humble that they know things which Our Father has hidden from the powerful, and that the first of these is, precisely, that men must practise forgiveness, because forgiveness is the sole guarantee of peace.

But I sincerely believe that here there is a duty that others must come and share. The first condition for the growth of Fourth World families' collective action for peace is that brothers, full time volunteers, stand by their side in the face of injustice, empty-handed, without weapons or luggage, no previously-held theories or resources. In short, the condition is that

they come not only as full time volunteers to the brotherhood, but also as students, prepared to learn from these families and later to become active witnesses.

Did Jesus do otherwise to bring about the Kingdom of Heaven? What else did He do but become one of the excluded, the last of the last, in order to reveal to all those poor masses pursuing Him that they were the first who could understand; that it would be around them that any peace would be created, and the Kingdom would be built? Without this sharing of our own lives as Christ did, in all sincerity, I do not see what could have persuaded these Fourth World families to assume the risks of community and collective non-violence.

Because, despite everything, we must evaluate the risks which we bring to the poorest when we suggest a shared non-violent action. Have we thought about how the wealthy may react in their hearts and minds to the rising up of a housing estate in a peaceful demonstration supported solely by the burden of their extreme poverty? The families do not need much imagination to see the dangers. We have seen it: "It's better to remain silent," they say, "otherwise they will throw us out and they will take all our children." These risks are not imaginary, since this entire population has experienced eviction and their children being taken into care for over a century!

Yet, in 1968, when France seemed to be toppling into revolution, these poorest families set about seeking dialogue with the universities and their student protesters, and family and workers' organisations of all persuasions: "We have the most to lose from strikes. Our benefits are held up in the post and our children have nothing to eat." What humiliation in return to see truckloads of students arriving and dumping the leftovers of the food distributed to the factory strikers. It had been left lying around and some of it had gone off!

If, however, the Fourth World families did hold out, it was not due to a small number of successes which, often, were too quickly called into question by subsequent failures. I believe I can say that it was a result of the experience itself, henceforth being shared with a Volunteer Corps which had become international. For, hard and humiliating lessons were learnt in this contact with the well-off! They discovered that, often, for the rich, the struggle was merely one of ideas and that, for them, truth was only on a conceptual level, while for them, truth was found in life. "They have some fine ideas, but they cannot really know us."

It was a difficult learning experience for the full time volunteers as well. Were they not part of the generation which wanted to change the world? They believed so. However, when they went to meetings at the School of Medicine, the Sorbonne or the university in Nanterre, the microphone was torn from their hands.

Despite their disappointment, the families continued to seek brotherhood between all people. They passed on the word to others: "That's right, justice and peace; the word is, love one another!" It was also what the full time volunteers asserted by their very lives, having learned from the families themselves: even in the worst poverty, love is possible; that the will to reject imprisonment in a ghetto is stronger than the oppression of those who build the ghettos; that the rule of might is no longer mandatory if mankind rejects it and if mankind, in response, uses the words of the humble, as men without weapons. Having learned from their experiences in the housing estates, the Volunteer Corps asserted that, deep down, the smallest needed harmony, reconciliation and peace. This Volunteer Corps brought no outside ideology to the Fourth World, nor any special

skills, except one: they had learnt and were continuing to learn, day by day, to hear, decipher the signs, and return their history to the poor.

The only outcome we are certain of today is that this approach contributes to the liberation of the poorest, to the point where they themselves can become men of reconciliation and partnership. But we are also certain that this outcome includes a great danger: that of maintaining the status quo of injustice, making non-violence the "bread and circuses" for the poor.

## **FOR PEACE, ABANDON ALL POWER**

Proclaiming that we are enemies to no one, that the fight for true justice can have neither victor nor vanquished and that there can be no other alternative to peace than a reconciliation in brotherhood, represents a threat to those who hold any kind of power. Because peace and non-violence for peace – the poorest from all ages have taught us this – means a loss of power for those who have it.

All our actions and movements for peace must be reviewed as soon as they gain in strength and prestige. The question must be asked immediately, as soon as the slightest power base is gained. For believers, this question is asked under the gaze of Jesus Christ, reminding the world that salvation came through His decision to renounce all power, becoming equal to the most helpless and the most reprobate. We must thus ask ourselves where we are going with the Fourth World when we encourage them in their search for peace. Our approach may lead them, one day, to find themselves more deeply immersed in extreme poverty than before, more disappointed and more desperate.

How can we not tremble before the fragility of these modest victories? Are they a victory for the poor? Certainly they are in the immediate future. But a victory achieved for how long? And if these humble victories do not lead to progress, if they stop or even regress, what will become of the Fourth World tomorrow? In the information society which is being created before our very eyes, will underprivileged workers be able to continue asserting what they would like to be and what they would like this new humanity, with its horizons enlarged by electronic media, to become? Will the fight for the lessening of men's troubles and for modernisation be a fight for peace – that is to say, a fight which serves, from the outset, the poorest?

All our battles must make us pause to consider, in view of the fact that Fourth World families are not invited to contribute to them and fully participate in them. This question applies to us all, as well as to our most genuine movements for non-violence and peace. Is our non-violence theirs? Is the peace we seek Jesus Christ's peace to achieve unity among all men?

These are the questions which underprivileged families continue to ask us. They do not want them to remain within our circle, but to echo throughout the world, to establish a constant questioning in the world. Non-violence – who would know better than these families? - is a daily challenge, an achievement to be reconquered every day. You yourselves reached this conclusion long ago. So, why wait to make an alliance with the families who are the furthest from the wayside? Did Christ not direct us towards them first of all?

Through our struggles, fights and prayers, God builds a new world where the last will finally be the first, where the powerful will be dethroned – a world where the rich will give up everything, where they will give back their property, powers and privileges to join up again with Jesus at the heart of extreme poverty. This world already lives within us.

Jesus, disfigured, heckled by the poor themselves; Jesus on the way to Golgotha, where the just never came for fear of soiling themselves, proclaims: Happy are the poorest, and blessed are those who, in leaving behind everything to join them become, like them, hungry for peace.