

THE FOURTH WORLD AND NON-VIOLENCE

(Translation of “Quart Monde et non-violence” by Joseph Wresinski¹)

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Preliminary Remarks

“The history of the Fourth World and non violence,” this is the theme which you entrusted to me. We could express it with the following question: Can someone crushed by extreme poverty, in the situation of injustice experienced by the Fourth World as a violation of Human Rights and, therefore, as violence, be an agent of peace and brotherhood? I’d like to tell you how the families of the Fourth World themselves answer this question.

I feel that if we want to understand their answers we should first of all remember briefly the age-old violence inflicted on the very poor. After a quick summary of some examples of violence done to the underprivileged, I’ll attempt to outline their reactions recorded in areas of extreme poverty where teams of ATD FOURTH WORLD strive to share the life and hopes of families.

I’ll point out three reactions as answers to the fate imposed on them. For Fourth World families, a first attitude when facing obstacles standing before them is what I’ll call *avoidance*. We’ll call the second *individual, non-violent confrontation*. The third will be *active non-violence springing from common awareness*.

Everything I’m going to tell you, ATD FOURTH WORLD has learned from the suffering of extremely poor families in France during the 1950’s. From the suffering of real flesh and blood families who could no longer stand living in slums, in shanty towns, in housing developments, who could no longer stand enduring hunger, unemployment, material deprivations, but especially the contempt, humiliation and fear caused by their neighbors. By neighbors who, little by little, were climbing out of the wreckage of war and entering the society of well-being.

Because we could not stand watching families suffer so much both from material destitution and from contempt a handful of people, then more and more, were led to decide to live and share with them. Not to bring them food and clothing, but to share in their suffering in order to understand it from inside and, together with the families, to change it into honor and hope. We would never have randomly become their friends, and they ours, unless we went to live with them. This sharing in the suffering caused by contempt revealed to us that the history of the poorest is one of violence.

A Destiny of Violence

At the outset we should surely remember that our societies in the Western world contain unbroken chains of the very poor, pushed aside from father to son, throughout history and throughout transformations of society, to the very bottom of the social ladder. Pushed to the bottom of the world where families, a whole group of people in fact, are the prime victims of all kinds of violence. They form a stable core of human beings representing the endurance of a milieu spanning all the changes and all the epochs. This stable core of families passes on a collective memory, more or less cloudy, more or less conscious and constructed, that the Fourth World holds like any other milieu.

Let me just mention here, so that we are well aware of it, that the Fourth World experiences an ancestral history which, by definition, because it is passed on, is a history of violence. It is not because the affluent have not written it nor taken it into account that the underprivileged do not carry it within themselves, that they are not marked by it mentally and physically in their basic attitudes as well as in their everyday behavior.

Of course, it's a memory of violence, but how does it make itself felt? I will only mention several "highlights" here merely to put us in harmony with the poorest of our time. Today they have inherited a heavy history of oppressions and brutalities, perfectly coherent in its continuity. So let's remember how, throughout every epoch, extreme poverty has existed, especially in western society. We know about it first thanks to people who, in every era, stood up to alleviate it or even to destroy it.

This is how we know that misery sometimes took to the roads, uprooted; sometimes stretched out, starved, silent, motionless, across the countryside. Finally, it sometimes crowded into agitated, noisy, unhealthy neighborhoods in cities. In a little while, we will come back to the expulsion, the mixing, and the scattering of very poor groups of families, which have been done in our times always arbitrarily and forcefully. But the poorest have always paid the price of urbanization ever since the Middle Ages.

In every epoch, the Fourth World has also paid the price both of scarcity and of abundance, both the price of modernization leading to affluence for some and the price of years of belt-tightening for the whole country. They have also endured the deterioration of neighborhoods, being pushed out towards slums. They had to put up with the growth of gentrification, the expansion of cities, really being evicted and forbidden to live within city limits after nightfall. There have also been centuries of confinement in asylums, hospices, work houses, poor houses, without forgetting restricted neighborhoods and courtyards of magic and mayhem. All forms of urbanization have hurt the poorest.

Illness compounded these forceful measures. The poorest were also the most affected by bubonic plague, as well as all pandemics and contagious fevers, since they were obviously the most crowded together and weakened beforehand. Wars and great famines made matters worse. Because the poorest are also in armies, bands, gangs, and the rear

guard, the instrument of our wars. They leave widows and orphans behind in the villages, in the hovels to which they return crippled, unable to provide for their own. They are of course likewise the first to be wiped out when famine comes to lay waste the country.

Let's imagine the Hundred Years' War, causing chaos and famine, as well as the destruction of the groundwork of parishes and communes. Let's bring to mind the Napoleonic wars, when the poorest became a group of men returning to their miserable homes on crutches, a people of helpless widows, of children roaming the streets and the countryside. This is a people that suffered the most from these wars, because it lost that ultimate foundation, that final bastion against extreme poverty which is the family. To lose the secure cohesion of family life is serious for anyone. For the poorest, it is the last protection against the destruction of personal dignity that they lose with it.

Are we aware that the descendants of these extremely poor families of the past can be found in part today in neglected housing developments among the chronically unemployed? So across the ages, the absence of any to free chose as to where to live, the oversight of the life of the poorest by the affluent, the lack of protection against all kinds of catastrophes, that complete dependence on others and on nature that break down all efforts to show one's worth and all possibilities to take care of one's own. And to all this we must add ignorance, that scourge that forever locks the vicious cycle of extreme poverty. This ignorance, the absence of vital information, the lack of training and a trade turn the poorest from the start into people who are exploited, underemployed, and after all, unemployed.

There is the outline of what, in fact, forms a coherent and lasting destiny. There is what creates human beings with their life style and their history, today. I have, of course, offered you too sketchy a summary of the past of that population group that violence and its history have forged into a people. My concern was to remind you of this unique people who possess a unique experience of what human violence, both conscious and unconscious can be. This people repeats to us from one epoch to another that as long as extreme poverty is at the bottom of our social ladder, our societies will not be rooted in peace; the peace we seek will remain the peace of some, a selective peace.

NON-VIOLENCE AS AVOIDANCE

So we are at the heart of a population group violently mistreated in the name of our policies on housing and urbanization, but also in the name of all our other policies concerning school, employment, resources, or health, or even in the name of the smooth running of institutions created to implement these policies.

Furthermore, since their inception, our western democracies do not take into account the opinion and the voices of population groups trapped at the bottom of the social ladder. Their representation is neither ensured nor even expected. Not having the means to

follow the norms established for other citizens, how then could the Fourth World not be a helpless victim of the arbitrary, of decisions imposed on them without consulting them? This is the more so since these families confuse, disturb, and exasperate institutions and their environment. They challenge and provoke them somehow. How can we avoid to error of wanting to educate them by force, of obliging them to “tow the line”?

Now a poor and helpless person, controlled and pursued by our good and not so good intentions, what else can he do but avoid? In fact, it seems that the poorest avoid putting up any kind of overt resistance to the social worker, the priest, or their neighbors, for example. On the contrary, they strive to avoid confrontation, by covering up their tracks. So, if anyone accuses the parents of not sending children to school, the mother will try to push aside the question: “Just look, my own child is well nourished! That’s not the case of all the children in the housing development.” So in everyday life, we witness thousands of ways of dodging issues when facing someone known to be stronger than oneself. For example, instead of talking about the present situation for which he is blamed, a father will redirect the conversation toward the future, “Computers, that’s all that matters today, he will say. That’s the future.” Blur the focus, make peace, redirect the conversation, taking the child as a witness: “Tell him what you ate last night!” This is a way of using the children, to put them front and center.

But using the child as an intermediary, a way to escape, also means treating the child as adult. So Martine, who is nine, is sent to the debt collector; she must go and promise him that the family will pay its debts which is a way of avoiding for a few days or weeks everything being confiscated. However, parents feel that being forced to sidestep confrontation and violence by hiding behind their children is a deep-seated suffering. In fact, all these cover-ups, even if they prevent the family from being torn apart for the time being, are paid for with shame. You have to let family members get dirty, for example. Like that lady who, fearing that her husband will get fired, will swallow her humiliation and not say a word to his employer who she’s come to see to excuse his absenteeism and who answers: “So much the better, at least that’s one less day I’ll have to pay this fellow who can’t do anything right!” Other parents won’t say anything when the teacher assures them that their son will never do anything worthwhile, that he can only a juvenile delinquent.

Many Fourth World adults, therefore, shut their bitterness up inside themselves, when the social worker gives them advice, when a teacher is lecturing them, when they are speechless in front of a judge. They are afraid to say what they think. They know only too well that whatever they do or say, they will always be wrong. Occasionally, some will say afterwards, “I really tricked the judge; I agreed to everything he was saying!” “These people are not going to bass me around!” Women will say, “It’s not the social worker who’s going to teach me how to raise my kids, since *I’ve* had so many!” A father will assert; “It’s not the teacher who’s going to frighten me!” So the poorest practice non-violence by multiplying dodges, by avoiding everything that could lead to confrontation and prevent them from living in a state that will at least look something like peace.

Those who are unfamiliar with the world of extreme poverty will perhaps think that this is cowardice or fear. It is true that, when facing people with power and the means to oppress and to exclude them, the poorest tremble. They know from experience that there is nothing to reply to these people, nothing to be gained. So their avoidance is avoidance for survival, even if only with a semblance of peace. Among themselves, to me, to volunteers, they will confess; “Whatever I say, I’ll always be wrong, so I’d rather keep quiet. I don’t want to let myself be insulted. And I want to keep my children, so I shut up.”

After all, Fourth World families are lucid and perfectly aware of their vulnerability. It is so easy to blame the humble for something, to poke fun at their ignorance, to make them pay for their refusal to surrender. This is what happened to Madame Da Silva, condemned to seventeen years in prison for having tried to commit suicide with her child. She knew that whatever she said her desperate act could not be understood. It was better to keep quiet, to turn away from conversations, to let disaster follow its course.

Do we need to say that this modicum of tranquility, obtained thanks to running away, to humiliations and to silence, completely paralyzes the poorest. This is non-violence that builds nothing, neither dignity, not peace. It is only a lesser evil for those who know only too well that they are only allowed to remain silent: “You’ll answer when I ask you a question. I’m doing the talking; you don’t know anything, so shut up.”

We grasp this complaint which reverberates in our ears: “I want them to understand. I want them to leave us alone. I want them to respect us.” What a moving lesson that we hear from families in such simple terms! They are endlessly linking together understanding, respect, and peace. They are not asking for peace which would consist in ignoring them. They are looking for peace grounded in understanding and respect. Peace rooted in brotherhood and dignity for the poor.

NON-VIOLENCE AS THE INDIVIDUAL MEEKNESS OF THE POOREST, THEIR WAY OF BRINGING OUT THE MEEKNESS IN OTHERS

Still, there’s not only non-violence that almost tears a person apart. The families experience another feeling which leads them not to meet violence with violence. This is the feeling they express when they say: “What do you expect! They can’t understand; they have never been through it! They have jobs and money.”

This kind of meekness the poorest show with respect to the affluent is ably summarized in these words of a child: “What should happen is that the rich should come and live with us. We’d go to live in their homes; afterwards, we’d give them their houses back, and then they would know what it’s like to live as we do.” This was not merely a child speaking. This was a statement coming from the bottom of the poorest’s thinking and intuition. It comes from poor people who have not taken part in the struggles of the

working class, since both today and yesterday they have been too poor to take part in the struggles of the working class, to share in their memory and their pride as workers. But they have their own pride, another kind of pride and memory.

Furthermore, it's not cowardice on their part when they get back in touch with a neighbor who has reported their kid to the police. To save face, they'll tell anyone who is surprised by this: "It's true that our children are tough! Sometime even we can't take it". Then the father and mother will add: "Anyhow, we have to make peace if we want to go on living!"

Often, the affluent don't understand this way of making peace again, of pulling together again after a fight, after arguments in bars which people are eager to qualify as "drunken brawls", whereas they are the expression of a huge amount of exasperation and despair. The well-off don't understand these men who have just been fighting and who are going to start to repair a bike, a motorcycle, a car together. They don't understand this man who, angry with his neighbor, recommends him to his boss in spite of everything so that he'll hire him. "Because," as he'll tell me later, "with the kids he's got, he has to put food on the table!"

Who can understand? However, everything can be explained if we think of this thirst, this need for peace that dwells in the heart of the poorest. Families in housing developments carry this thirst within themselves. Each of them is forced to act in one way or another to quench it. Each of them is also forced by the will for peace which drives his neighbors, always born anew with the same intensity. One cannot live alongside others without noticing and suffering because of all they endure. Therefore, we should not be surprised to see a neighbor, who's starving himself, leave a box of food on the doorstep of the family next door.

Underlying all of this, the families need other people. To keep your dignity, to remain respectable in your own and your children's eyes, you need to make yourself useful, to be appreciated and well considered by your neighbors. This is the source of this insistent need to get along with those with whom your situation forces you to live in close proximity.

We have understood that the poorest have not chosen their neighborhood. The policy of housing developments compels very poor households of different backgrounds to live together, without offering the means to do it in a spirit of mutual respect. Just imagine what it means for men and women who are exhausted to have neighbors who are loud and boisterous in apartments that are not soundproof! To have to accept a former prisoner as a neighbor, someone who has robbed or abused your daughter when she was only eight!

The need to manage to get along with a wider environment joins the need to get along with your neighbors. The poor have no choice in these matters. Fourth World families have not chosen their children's schools. They have no choice in health issues; they are

forced to go to emergency rooms in their neighborhoods. They have no way to pick a social worker, not to complain about the one who is imposed on them.

In a nutshell, you must accept all these families with whom you have to live and who continually need you in one way or another and whom you need too. Likewise, you must accept all these people from outside networks who have a hold on you and your children and without whom you know you can't accomplish anything; you have to live with them too with a modicum of consensus.

I can still see this man standing in a cemetery last July. His daughter of nine had been hit by a car on the sidewalk where she was walking. After the burial, the father told me: "You see, I wanted to strangle the bastard who had killed my daughter! But when I got to the police station and saw that it was a handicapped woman, I just didn't know what to say. I thought that for her too it was terrible to have killed my child. We cried together and I told my wife that we must forgive. But believe me, it's hard!"

As to the harmony to be gained, at whatever price, with respect to the society that surrounds them, let's try again to probe into this need. The poorest need to obtain peace with the world that surrounds them, because life has taken away their identity and their rights. They are not recognized as subjects of rights and they don't have the means to act such. When Fourth World families become aware that, like this, they are deprived of all rights, they have only one efficient way to be recognized in spite of it all, one ultimate, absolute weapon. It consists in displaying their extreme poverty and the suffering it causes: Look at me, feel what I'm feeling. Then you'll understand and you'll have to take my hand in yours.

This is something the poorest have experienced, and in fact they know how to use their misery, not to fight but to appeal to brotherhood. It is false to think that they could not revolt. They have already revolted in the course of history! What most often stops them is this senseless thirst for recognition, to be recognized as a brother, as a human being: "May human beings learn to take one another by the hand;" as people say in underprivileged housing developments. So to gain recognition for their identity, they highlight their misfortune, aware that it speaks for itself and that it forces people they're talking with to ask themselves questions. They do not show it by dwelling on things that humiliate them, as employees in public services ask them to, but by stating their suffering.

So to secure help and support, this unemployed man or this homeless husband with his wife and children say how much they are suffering. To put a roof over his head, the homeless man tells about his wife's illness down to the last detail, mentioning the number and brutality of people who came to expel them: "They broke the stove, laid the mattress on the sidewalk while it was raining." Another man, who was going to ask the mayor for help, carries his four year-old child in his arms.

They don't say; "My rights have been trampled on." They say; "Just look at what we endure; help us." This is how they lay down beside the social worker all the burdens that

weigh on them. Like this eleven year-old girl, who came to see me one fine day with a handwritten note, requesting some money to buy bread. I wanted to send her packing by telling her; “It’s your mother who should come to see me.” But the little girl replied; “Don’t I have the right to eat?”

The ultimate weapon, consisting in extreme poverty that appeals to pity, is the complaint of the poor. It can call forth alms, maybe even help and solidarity, and the poor know it. Won’t a lot of affluent people talk about a lack of modesty, a lack of a sense of their rights, a lack of pride? But it goes much deeper. The Fourth World knows, their grand parents already knew by their experience, that, when one is too crushed, rights no longer come into play. All that remains is to hope for pity. Experience teaches the poorest that even Human Rights are viable only for people who are recognized as human beings; they are not viable for people who are suspected of being sub-human, inferiors, rejects. They know that human beings last fire walls are the rights written into declarations and constitutions. They know that a human being’s final fire wall is mercy, love, justice, and peace grounded in love.

In a slum neighborhood of Glasgow, in a run-down housing development of Marseille, in a marginalized housing development of Basel, this is still the only peace that inhabitants can build amongst themselves. It is because – as I was saying – they are driven to their wit’s end, to fights, to violence some with respect to others. To survive nonetheless, to get the milk you need from a neighbor, to persuade a neighbor to help you drive your wife to the hospital, one must constantly forgive the fights, the insults of the night before. Without forgiveness and meekness, life is impossible in an overcrowded apartment building, in an infamous housing development. Then people will say; “You have to understand him. He’s violent, and he attacked me. But he hasn’t got a job, and he was turned down for unemployment compensation. He loved his wife, and she left him.”

But personal meekness, pushed aside in a moment of unbearable sorrow, and emerging again the next day, betrays those who live like this. “So much instability, so much inconsistency!;” social workers and neighbors remark. “They’ve always got their guns loaded, then, the next minute, they’re pals;” people say with tongue in cheek. This is the search for an impossible peace of the most desperate kind. The reason is that it is not recognized as such, but derided, ridiculed, and ignored by everyone.

Furthermore, this is a search for peace and brotherhood that is dangerous as long as it remains a personal strategy to obtain immediate relief. Because it maintains the status quo of a false relationship between the rich and the poor. It prompts us to acts of pity that never reach fraternity: soup kitchens, distribution of clothes, handing out piles of leftovers, of “Christmas goodies,” of milk for children in school restaurants. But what is the meaning of milk in a school, if the school does not change to guarantee education to the most underprivileged children? What is the meaning of “evening soup kitchens” in Paris, if we don’t provide professional training then next morning? What is the meaning of shelters and emergency housing, if afterwards we don’t provide secure homes, work, and income?

As I was saying, Human Rights without love, without an unshakable respect for human beings do not work for the poorest. Yet in the same way, love that is only skin-deep pity, that does not go as far as recognizing the poor's Human Rights, leaves them in a situation of non-fraternity, of painful inferiority, and of helplessness against humiliations. This false love breaks human beings more than hunger does.

This is why the personal quest for peace is dangerous for the poorest. The kind of non-violence that changes the world is one that leads the families to take a stand *together*. This is non-violence that is conscious, shared, and active. Now I'd like to talk to you about this kind of non-violence which is also in gestation in the Fourth World.

NON-VIOLENCE AS A COMMON AWARENESS

Non-violence as a search for love and unity between all human beings is right there in the heart of these families with defenseless against violence. I must talk to you about this non-violence that is a project for humankind.

We are going to follow a true story looking at facts, if you like, to see how non-violence as avoidance and non-violence as individual meekness can become something else. First I will take some examples that we have witnessed first hand in the Parisian area. You may know that in the 1960's a significant time of debate, refusal and even revolt occurred over the spreading of shanty towns and particularly around the emergency housing camp of Noisy-le-Grand.² It was during these discussions that the word "injustice" was invoked for the first time. Along with the teams of the Fourth World Movement, this work was take up by the people living in the places of extreme poverty that the emergency housing camp of Noisy-le-Grand, the housing estate of La Cerisaie in Stains, and the two huge shanty towns in Saint Denis and the La Courneuve were. A maelstrom of various violent reactions engulfed us then. It was as if, in this heterogeneous world composed of the homeless, of underprivileged French families, of immigrant workers, of families repatriated from North Africa,³ or even of families from a nomadic background, they all suddenly saw only one possible reaction: revolt.

This was a time of great hardships, starting with the emergency housing camp of Noisy-le-Grand. More than two hundred and fifty French families were still living there, having come from all parts of France, or having been repatriated from Africa. Some had been living in destitution for several generations: they were illiterate, under-employed, in poor health, and just barely scraping by. Others were slightly less oppressed, and everyone was not equally helpless. However, they were all housed identically in small twin hangars made of fibro-cement. Each shed was 8.40 meters long and 5.20 meters wide. Families with seven or eight children squeezed into this tiny space; they were poorly protected from the winter, and the children faced dehydration in the summer. Because of the wretched living conditions, children spent long months in the hospital every year.

Among these under-nourished people, deprived of hygiene, a storm of violence suddenly welled up. I was telling you about their constant avoidance maneuvers that many have turned into survival skills. I was telling you about their indulgence and meekness that are always renewed. Now, here they were suddenly burning their own community's buildings, erected with so much difficulty and patience. A kindergarten went up in smoke; a little shack housing an office and files requesting help was pillaged. Stealing multiplied; a warehouse was looted. Excited men and women confronted the mayor and communal employees. All of a sudden, some claimed to be involved in actions to keep Algeria French.

In the chain reaction, to protect me as a priest among them, men armed with rifles started night patrols around the cabin where I lived. In the center of this chaotic climate, volunteers felt completely lost. We needed some time to distinguish the true revolt from the false one. The true one, that of families known as "Pieds-Noirs",⁴ followed by some working-class households, and the false and awkward one of the underprivileged families.

I will never forget the stream of men and women, living by salvaging scrap metal and rags, and accustomed to spending their time in garbage heaps, coming to tell me; "Father, tell the people setting fires to leave!" "What if we left to find peace; would you come with us, Father? You'll be fine; wait and see. We'll build a cabin just for you!"

That morning and the weeks following it were among the most decisive moments in the growing the awareness and defining the identity of the Fourth World Volunteer Corps. In the midst of all this violence, volunteers were witnesses and could embrace the awareness of the poorest families: we don't want violence; we want peace. Thanks to experiencing several hallucinatory months, the families themselves could discern and tell themselves and us what they thought about this sort of violence proposed by families stronger than themselves.

Several years later, the families of La Cerisaie entrusted us with an identical message. They belonged to a population group too crushed for the major movements of this epoch to take into account, while the strike gained national acceptance and the universities were in revolt, no one came to urge them to rise up as well⁵. However, they knew what was happening in near-by shanty towns where migrant workers who had jobs lived, whereas 80% of the men in La Cerisaie were unemployed. Violence took root there, in the midst of the enormous caused by not being taken into consideration by anyone. Among the places of extreme poverty of the Parisian area, La Cerisaie became the housing estate of despair. Violence reared its head, violence directed this time against the only people from outside living in the sheds: Fourth World volunteers! They were harassed, robbed, their lodgings were damaged both day and night for weeks. When all is said and done, the volunteers themselves were facing men and women who were totally disoriented and who were telling them; "This is not what we want. We wanted to know if you, at least, would be on our side; if you, at least, would stay with us."

I won't spend any more time on the story of these shanty towns that *La Campa* in La Courneuve and *Francs-Moisins* in Saint Denis represented then. In *La Campa*, it was first and foremost a question of more or less violent exchanges between the inhabitants and police or employees responsible for rolling over the hastily built shelters with a bulldozer from time to time. But the Spanish families who set the tone were not familiar with the struggle of classes, known to French workers. They were too poor, too isolated, too threatened by losing a work permit or a green card; their violence only flared up intermittently when facing a bulldozer or a uniformed policeman.

In *Francs Moisins*, a shanty town of more than five thousand souls where the Portuguese were the prevalent nationality, generalized violence did not become the rule because of the rural background of most of the families, their way of thinking, their prudence, and their wisdom altogether typical of farmers. For them too, this whole upheaval was harmful and dangerous. As a sign of their determination to defend themselves with whatever arms they could lay their hands on – shovels and pickaxes – the Portuguese set up a watch for several nights, fearing that the students of the University of Nanterre, out of solidarity with the working class would, come and burn down the shanty town.

This refusal of violence expressed by very poor population groups was certainly not a real project for non-violence yet. But in this historical moment, the poorest were facing situations in which violence was not only a temptation, an instinctive personal reaction to impending misfortune. Collective violence was suggested to them. Outsiders came to urge them to resort to common actions against society. Fourth World teams saw first hand that, when considering these possibilities of joining a certain kind of struggle, the poorest, after a period of anxiety, said no! “No! We want things to change, but not like this!”

In fact, change was two-sided. “We want things to change!” the families were saying. As I reread interactive observation reports by volunteers of this era, I believe that I can say that, during these years between 1960 and 1968, the phrase, “we, the families of housing developments,” first found its way into their vocabulary, almost imperceptibly, then in a more and more obvious way. The poorest became aware that they could say *us*. From now on, France has at least recognized the injustice of their housing conditions. It was no longer a matter of charity, as it has been ten years earlier, but of rights and justice. The poorest had become endowed with rights! Within this recognition, still very fragile of course, the underprivileged families, at last counted among people having rights, could also begin to recognize one another. They could declare themselves as individuals, as households, as a group, worthy of rights and therefore honorable, and they no longer had to hide where they came from.

This *us* was the first acquisition issued in by these troubled years. It made possible this second awareness; “We want change, but we don't want it through hatred, hostility, and violence.” A common consciousness emerged. It remained to be seen which changes the families wanted and which paths they would take.

NON-VIOLENCE, A COMBAT FOR PEACE BETWEEN ALL HUMAN BEINGS

I was telling you about the awareness occurring in the broader surroundings of the families. In France, providing everyone with housing was no longer a matter of compassion, but a challenge to Human Rights. I believe that the presence of volunteer inside housing developments contributed a lot to enabling underprivileged families to become owners of this change for themselves as well. For what had these volunteers done, if not show by all available means their conviction that these families, their parents, their ancestors, who had been victims of extreme poverty for so long, deserved all the honors? When one is conscious of having honorable forbears, one is no longer greatly surprised to hear that one has rights.

To discover oneself as a person of dignity and honor, to discover honorable roots, to become aware that all human beings, however crushed by misery they may be, possess an inalienable dignity, disarms violence in places of extreme poverty. When people recognize themselves as respectable, *together*, they can also discover they are intelligent, that they know a lot about this extreme poverty which does not stop generating violence. One can learn to reason together. And when one knows how to reason, one knows how to persuade. “When we talk, we don’t fight;” was the conclusion reached one evening by one of the most violent men of a housing development in the Val d’Oise.

Using speaking from now on to lay bear together destitution, not individual but experienced by an entire people at the bottom of the social ladder, was carried forward through writing. In the emergency housing shelter of Noisy-le-Grand, families came together to have this unsanitary ghetto destroyed. Each week, for several months, they sent a letter to General de Gaulle, who was the President of the France. Taking turns, they displayed, each in their way but based on a common agreement, their suffering, their destitution, unemployment, and their children’s illnesses. They asked for the construction of a transitional housing estate where children and adults could finally live decently. When their request had been granted, some families even refused to be re-housed among the first ones, wanting to make sure that housing would be provided to everyone, and first of all to the poorest.

This is how families in the emergency housing shelter of Noisy-le-Grand used as a force for persuasion their deprivations, their state of being neglected and their suffering that had been forced upon them for more than ten years and, basically forever. They turned them into their ultimate weapon so that public authorities take them into consideration and propose to them new resources for living in dignity. What was different from the past was that they undertook it as a common action. This was already a way of pursuing a non-violent project in common.

But yet another turning point happened again in the 1960's. This was a two-fold turning point because, first of all, through efforts to strengthen their identity, the families had chosen a name. "We are the Fourth World." "We, the people of the Fourth World;" they said from now on. Now, among many other historical periods, the families particularly wanted to bring back to life the adventure of that defender of the poorest who was Dufourny de Villiers. In fact, on the eve of the French Revolution, this man recalled the existence of a Fourth Order: the sacred order of the unfortunate of the Kingdom. He compiled complaint notebooks and demanded the representation of the Fourth Order alongside the nobles, the clergy, and the Third Estate. The families recognized themselves in this endeavor and discovered they had extraordinary forbears. "That's us;" they said. Then the "Fourth Estate" became the "Fourth World."

This turning point opened onto into a second blossoming which was that "We, the people of the Fourth World" could no longer only be "We, the families of Noisy-le-Grand" or "We, the families of la Cerisaie". The horizon had broadened to include the region, France, Europe, and, starting in 1963, the United States and India.

Already in Noisy, thanks to the weekly letters, Fourth World families recalled the risk democracy takes when it accepts injustice. They recalled how democracy discredits itself when it considers the neglect of the weakest as inevitable and necessarily linked to all projects for the future. Still empty-handed and without any shouting or threatening, they re-introduced and re-habilitated all the poor through an awareness of democracy.

Just like the residents of *La Campa* did at the same time by choosing the same weapon: the destitution, the suffering and the contempt they had to endure. Once again, the strategy was established by general consensus, without fancy speeches. Their shanty town was built along a national highway that thousands of cars took, day and night. They decided to put up signs stating their situation on the trunks of trees lining the highway: "Here, 3,500 people, including 2,000 children, are stuck in the mud!" Every evening, at nightfall, the police came to tear down and destroy these signs. However, these signs mentioned nothing else but the destitution experienced by 3,500 people, including 2,000 children, who were not even asking for justice but merely for dignity. Every morning, men, women, youths, and children from the shanty town put fresh signs back on the trees. Until the day when the director of the Fund for Social Action agreed to put *La Campa* on the list of shanty towns whose families were to be re-housed as a priority.

In *Francs-Moisins*, in Saint-Denis, families opted for a similar but perhaps even more original strategy. To express their dead-end situation, they decided to do a survey on it, assisted by a small team of the Movement's research workers. This survey, undertaken by the families themselves, translated the official statistics into terms of human suffering. The survey was both a feat and a challenge, since in the eyes of the administration this shanty town of more than five thousands souls did not exist! Located on an empty lot, it had no address for the Post Office in fact! To receive mail, residents rented their mail boxes "down town" as they put it. This bold, non-violent process produced an astonishing result: the Fund for Social Action helped to cover the expenses of this study that no administration could welcome *a priori*.

Do the results mean that the families of Noisy, of Stains, of Saint-Denis, and of La Courneuve were right? Probably, since in the 1960's, meetings of Fourth World adults changed little by little into People's Universities. They could have turned into political meetings aimed at stoking a struggle of human beings against other human beings, of the poor against the wealthy. The families made them into their University where exchanges contributed to a new knowledge, built together, forging unity and establishing peace. This was peace amongst themselves, but also peace with everyone who was oppressing them.

They invited to these evenings the director general for Employment, a director of National Education, and many other representatives of public authorities. These People's Universities, sometimes held in basements, or cabins, sometimes under canopies, or even in prisons, have now stretched throughout the world. They emerge directly from the history that had started inconspicuously in the Parisian area.

Another peace process has been rooted in these universities in places and streets where no other university would have dreamed of opening up: large-scale gatherings with which we have progressively managed to mark the families' march forward. They are popular events celebrating Human Rights where families can come together beyond borders and oceans to express what they have thought about and built together in local and regional People's Universities. Both the universities and the historic international events always present a dual characteristic:

- they take place in a climate of peace, joy and celebration amongst the families;
- they represent outreach to other citizens.

Because all the officials, all the politicians, all the professionals of every calling, all the ordinary citizens from all social backgrounds are invited to them. Since for the poorest, it is true that no class, no political party, no profession is to be favored. Since none of them have really put the last first. This is really why the poorest essentially bring everyone together. The unity of all can be achieved around them. This is because, on the one hand, Fourth World families cannot honestly have any preferences and they also need everyone. While, on the other hand, all their fellow citizens have real work to do to reach them in a lasting way.

Underprivileged families taught us all this by enabling us to live it. In this way, following a path which we ourselves have not finished analyzing, families and volunteers gave birth to a movement struggling against misery with the poorest as primary actors. It could only be a march towards consensus and peace.

NON-VIOLENCE IS A SUCCESS IN AND OF ITSELF

I'd like to make a final remark about the indispensable condition that made this history possible and about the fruits that it bore. Because the families also taught us day by day

that non-violence when it is freely chosen and practiced actively and in common, when it is a plan for humankind, represents an unthinkable danger for them. This risk can be considered only if other people make a commitment and devote their lives alongside them.

In not engaging an open struggle and in forgiving the unforgivable, the poor are our masters, and the first of these injustices is that only a few of us go to tell it to them. As a priest, I cannot help thinking that my first duty is to go tell the poor that they are blessed. They are blessed because they are artisans of peace. My first duty is to go tell the humble that they know things that the Father has hidden from the powerful and that the first hidden thing is, precisely, that men must practice forgiveness, because forgiveness is the only guarantee of peace.

But I strongly believe that this is a duty that others must come to share. The first prerequisite for this transition of Fourth World families towards a common action for peace is that brothers, volunteers, come to stand beside them to face injustice, empty-handed, with no weapons or equipment, no pre-established theories, and no resources. In a word, the pre-requisite is that they come as volunteers in fraternity but also as students, to learn from these families and then to become active witnesses.

Did Jesus act differently to initiate the Kingdom? Did he do anything other than become excluded himself, the last among the last, to reveal to these throngs of poor people who were following him what they were the first to be able to understand: that it was around them peace would be shaped and the Kingdom built? If Christ had not shared his own life with them, I honestly do not see what could have moved Fourth World families to take the risk of collective non-violence in their communities.

For, in spite of it all, one has to measure the risks we are making the poorest run, when we propose a non-violent action in common to them. Have we imagined what the surge of destitute toward a protest for peace can provoke in the minds and hearts of the affluent when it is pushed only by the weight of their misery? The families themselves don't need much imagination to see the dangers. Here's what we have heard: "We'd better keep quiet," they told us; "if not, they're going to evict us and put all our children in care." These risks are not imaginary at all, since eviction and taking children away have already been part of the daily life of an entire population group for more than a century!

Still, in 1968, as France tottered on the verge of revolution, the poorest families started to look for a dialogue with academics and protesting students, with family associations and workers of all tendencies. "We have suffered the most from the strikes; we don't get our money orders and our welfare checks. Our children have no more food." How humiliated they felt to see the trucks out of which students spilled leftover food donated by striking factory workers that was abandoned and partly spoiled!

However if Fourth World families managed to stay on track, it was not because of a few successes too often upset by new failures. I think I can say that it was because of what a volunteer corps that had become international was experiencing from then on.

Now what they learned from this contact with rich people was hard and humiliating for the families. They discovered that, for these people, the struggle was often one of ideas, that for them truth was located in concepts, while for them truth came from life itself. “They have nice ideas, but they are unable to understand us.”

It was a steep learning curve for volunteers too. Didn't they belong to that generation that wanted to change the world? However, when they went to meetings in the *École de médecine* in the Sorbonne or at Nanterre, people ripped the microphone out of their hands.

Despite their disappointment, families continued to want brotherhood between all human beings. They handed this message on to others: “This is what peace and justice are. In short, we must love one another!” This was what volunteers asserted by their life style, because they had learnt it from the families. That even in the worst destitution, love was possible. That the will not to let oneself be locked into a ghetto is stronger than the oppression of those who build ghettos. That the law of the strongest is a law no longer is people resist it, if, to counter it, human beings use the words of the humble, like people with no weapons. Having learned it from the underprivileged, the volunteer corps asserted that, deep inside themselves, the overlooked families required understanding, reconciliation, and peace. This volunteer corps was not bringing any foreign ideology into the Fourth World, nor any special competence moreover, except for one. The skill of having learned and learning anew day by day to recognize and to interpret the signs, to give their history back to the poorest.

The only result that we are sure of today is that this process helps to free the poorest to the extent that they can become by themselves people of reconciliation and of partnership. But we are also certain that this result contains a serious danger: it maintains the status quo of injustice, turning non-violence into “*panem et circenses pro pauperis*”⁶

TO REACH PEACE, WE MUST GIVE UP ALL POWER.

Proclaiming that one is not anyone's enemy, that in struggles for true justice there are neither victors nor vanquished, proclaiming that there is no other alternative for peace in the world than a fraternal gathering, represents a threat for those who wield any kind of power. Since the poorest of all times teach us that peace and non-violence in favor of peace means abandoning power for those who possess any.

All our efforts and movements to promote peace have to be revamped as soon as they acquire strength and prestige. The question arises immediately as soon as the smallest power comes into play. For believers, this question arises under the eyes of Jesus who reminds the world that salvation came through his decision to renounce all power, making himself the equal of the weakest and the most criticized. So we have to ask ourselves where we are taking Fourth World families, when we encourage them in their

quest for peace. Our proposals may lead them to becoming one day more mired than before in misery, more disappointed and desperate.

How can we not tremble when considering the fragility of their modest conquests? Do the families gain anything? They are perhaps an advantage in the short term. But for how long will they remain an advantage? And if these humble victories do not move forward, if they falter or move backwards, as we may fear in these times of crisis and upheavals, what will happen to Fourth World families tomorrow? In the information society that is being created under our noses, will the underprivileged workers still continue to state who they want to be, what future they want for this new humanity whose horizons have been broadened by new technologies? Will the fight for easing the hardships of human beings and for modernization be a fight for peace, meaning for serving the poorest first?

All our combats should make us think in as much as Fourth World families are not invited to shape and take part in them fully. We must examine critically both ourselves and also our sincerest movements in favor of non-violence and peace. Is our kind of non-violence their kind? Is the peace we are seeking that used by Jesus to forge the unity of all human beings?

Such are the questions that underprivileged families ask us. They are not asking them so that we keep them for ourselves, but so that we spread them throughout the world, turning them into a constant questioning for the world. Who knows better than these families that non-violence is a daily challenge and a value always needing to be reclaimed? You arrived at that conclusion yourselves long ago. So why should you wait to align yourselves with the families most left behind by human progress? Didn't Jesus send us first towards them?

Through our struggles, our combats and our prayers, God is building a new world in which the last will finally be the first and the powerful will be dethroned. In this world the wealthy will have given everything up and will have given back their belongings power, and privileges, to join Jesus in the heart of misery. This world is already alive in us.

Disfigured and by the poor themselves, Jesus on the way to Golgotha where the just never came for fear of dirtying themselves, declares: "Blessed are you the poorest, blessed are those who, by leaving everything behind to join them, become, like them, thirsty for peace."

*(English translation by Charles F. Sleeth,
September 2009)*

¹ Notes

(1) Title of a chapter of Refuser la misère by Joseph Wresinski, published by Editions du Cerf and Editions Quart Monde, France, 2007, pp. 123-147

² For a more complete account of this struggle, see the English translation of “*The Violence Done to the Poor*“, Chapter VII of Refuser la misère by Joseph Wresinski, published by Editions du Cerf and Editions Quart Monde, France, 2007, pp. 113-121

³ Morocco, Algeria, and Tunisia were former French colonies and many of their workers migrated to France in the hope of securing a better life.

⁴ This is an epithet given to French families who had settled in Algeria when it was a French colony, and who wanted to keep it French, but who were forced to leave because of violent uprisings.

⁵ In May 1968, radical University students began street fighting in Paris, plunging the academic world first and then the entire country into a nation-wide strike that paralyzed France for more than a month.

⁶ This is a Latin expression meaning, “food and games for the poor.”