International Joseph Wresinski Center

THE FAMILY - A PLACE TO LIVE THE GOSPEL [1]
FATHER JOSEPH WRESINSKI

Translated by Nick Edwards

I The Family, Learning to Go Without.

Introduction - Age-old Questions about Poverty.

Every child in the world is poor. Why do I choose to say this right at the outset? All of the world's children are poor simply because they rely totally on adults and the adult world for everything in life. Doesn't the way children look for love, joy, and peace, and discover truth and beauty, depend on whether or not the people with whom they are living share these riches with them?

Yet we know that all around the world there are children who will never have the opportunity to discover its wonders, or to meet the people who build and shape it. There are children whose families and friends have nothing to share simply because they struggle too hard to stay alive. These are the children of misery.

Thus we are immediately confronted by two types of children and also by two types of poverty. The one grows out of dependence; the other, out of abandonment. The former is a temporary state, one which can empower human beings to grow and to make their contribution to the future. The latter is a poverty which destroys a person's life, stifles growth, buries hope and chokes off any faith in the future.

We must be very careful to make this distinction when we talk about poverty. It has always raised questions and still is the cause of much debate. It did so even when the Church was founded. The first of the Beatitudes offers the most striking example of this. In St. Luke's Gospel it says: "Blessed are you the poor!" Jesus' exclamation stops there. However St. Matthew goes further: "Blessed are the poor in spirit!" He allows us to give a spiritual meaning to poverty as a state we can freely choose. Being poor under the guidance of the Holy Spirit enables all human beings, even the rich, to feel concerned by the Beatitudes. They are concerned, if they learn to free themselves from all worldly goods.

Today, allow me to take up this debate with you because I know how upset you feel about the injustice of our world. Your hearts are shaken by the fact that millions upon millions of families live their daily lives in misery. Condemned to put all their strength and resources into the struggle to survive, these families are treated with contempt and beaten down by the hunger, ignorance, and rejection they have to endure. I know that all of this disturbs you greatly.

I feel that you are ready and willing to respond to your Christian calling, to live out the truth that, "Every man is my brother in and through Jesus Christ." I feel too, that you want to see your children grow up with the same concern for their neighbors in poverty that you learned from your parents.

1. Where Do We Turn in order to Understand our Mission?

Already I hear you asking me: How on earth can we change all of this? That is always the first question that comes to our minds, and I know that it concerns you deeply. Certainly, you are looking candidly at the state of our world, our society, our parishes, and our families. Despite all of the ideals upon which you have built your lives, you are well aware that injustice is all around you. You know that some people are left out in the cold to suffer terribly and that this happens even in your own parishes and neighborhoods, in the villages and towns of your own countries.

Often, without noticing it, you shut all of this out of your minds. But it only needs a disaster, a really cold spell, someone found dead in the street or a T.V. show on the famine in the Sahara, for you to recall the condition of these families, to be reminded of the suffering of the very poor. Do you remember last January, how shocked everyone was by that couple who were trying to, "give away their child", even before it was born, simply because they had absolutely nothing and wanted to make sure it would have a future!

In the face of such suffering you must surely agree that we cannot talk about ourselves as being poor, deprived, or wounded. Furthermore, as we discover how the poorest people are abandoned, how can we begin to answer our children's questions? How do we deal with the arguments of young people in our own families, who in the name of justice, refuse to get involved in parish-life because the poor are not made welcome? We teach the young that the poor are our brothers in Christ, God's chosen ones, but what are we doing to demonstrate that this is true? It worries us and we find ourselves asking how to do better, how to change things?

In order to understand our mission and to gain a better grasp of our responsibilities, let us now turn our attention to Jesus' family, which was the family of the Son of God and the model-family for all others. Indeed it was through his family that Jesus taught us what a family which never ceases to relate to the very poor of its time, a family with a true mission, is and ought to be.

Looking at his family, how could we possibly deny that God chose a life of extreme poverty for his Son as a way to save mankind? Born and dying outside of the city-walls, Jesus knew the meaning of poverty and rejection from his own experience. The temptation in the desert makes it clear yet again, that for Christ himself, this had to be a matter of personal choice and not accidental circumstances. In the hour of his temptation, he freely chose his Father's plan. Indeed he knew that if he lived the life of the most wretched of all, he would be able to save all people, leaving nobody out. He knew that if he lived the life of the most wretched, they would be able to assert from then on without any question: "Christ also came to save me".

It follows that by finding out what Jesus' family was like, we can also address the question of our own responsibilities as believers, as men and women of faith. In this way Jesus' family can lead us to a clearer understanding of what we must do in order to eradicate poverty. Let us try again then to discover this family together.

2. The Family of Jesus.

Jesus' family was an ordinary family, just another family of the people. He was born into it just like any other child who is born into the world. He grew up in it just like any other child grows up in the world. This means then that Jesus did not bypass birth, childhood, and adolescence. He did not suddenly turn up as the man that Israel was expecting. As St. Luke says on two separate occasions, "Jesus grew both in body and in wisdom, gaining favor with God and man".

As for his parents, Mary and Joseph, like any parents, had to build up their marriage and their home. Just like Jesus they did not suddenly appear as fully-developed actors in the midst of human history. They too had a childhood and an adolescence. Only the angel's appearance was able to change their lives, turning upside down the traditional order of things and leading them toward conflict.

Even though Mary was pregnant, Joseph took her as his wife because he loved her deeply. From this point of view, Jesus' family appears to us as one which is especially unique in its poverty. Still aren't there other things that make it so special? Looking at it more closely, we see that right from the beginning it seems to have been uprooted, not really fitting in. Jesus' family came from a little community in Galilee of whose existence in those days there is no clear proof.

In fact, Joseph, coming as he did from David's line, found no room in Bethlehem which was nonetheless his forefathers' homeland. No one expected him, no one wanted him there. He was just one more left out in the cold with his pregnant wife. The only refuge he could offer to Mary was a cave, placing him among the area's outcasts.

At that time such caves were used as shelters by the shepherds and especially by those without any work for the winter and with only a few sheep to call their own. No doubt they also served as a shelter for other poor people, outlaws, and robbers. The Zealots who opposed Roman rule probably used them as well. St. Luke tells that, "All who heard", were amazed at what the shepherds had to say about the child Jesus being brought into the world like this, outside of the city, where outcasts lived. This is why I imagine the cave being packed with people who like Mary and Joseph had nowhere to stay.

Jesus was born into a world of misery and despite his helplessness, perhaps because of it, this child and his parents became the center of attention. Such is the vulnerability of a child born in these circumstances that it never fails to make others act with tenderness and solidarity towards it. I have witnessed this so often all over the world.

I have seen it in New York, in the apartment of a family who didn't even have enough money to feed themselves and yet who welcomed everyone who came to them for shelter regardless of class or race. The mother was always heard to say, "How could I possibly leave them outside."

Then one day a young mother, just out of hospital, came to take refuge in her house with her new born baby. She was hiding from the social workers who wanted to take her baby away from her. At that moment, just as in Bethlehem, all around her swung into action. Another poor family gave her a cradle. Some children went knocking on doors to ask for some milk and baby-clothes... When the social workers found the mother and child in the apartment, the family who lived there and all of their neighbors jumped to their defence. They pointed to the cradle, saying, "Look, we've thought of everything, he's even got his own bed!"

Isn't this what happened in Bethlehem? Certainly, when they saw Mary and Joseph, people must have gone running to find food and milk for the mother**.** Surely, they must have said to themselves, "We can't leave her like that'! And so Jesus, weak and helpless like any new-born baby, and even more vulnerable, because of the poverty of his family, brought out the love of those around him.

The shepherds, used to living out in the open, considered by many to be rough and uncouth, could never have imagined for a moment that the Messiah would come to them. In the presence of a child in a manger, they realized that he was God's chosen one; they realized that this child had been given to them, the meek and long-suffering. He had been given to them, people who had to struggle for a living, sometimes having to steal to make ends meet. They recognized that he was given to shepherds like them who were even denied the right to take the witness stand in court, classed as ritually impure; that he was given to these Jews considered unworthy of learning the Torah. In addition to this when they looked at this child, these shepherds, these untrustworthy, ignorant people beheld the glory of God. They understood the meaning of God's plan for salvation. They sensed that this family had been sent to them as a sign of God's love.

If this child attracted those around him by his helplessness, he also attracted others who were "keeping watch by night". I am thinking of those "Wise Men", obsessed by their thirst for knowledge and understanding of the universe, and yearning for a change in the world. I can see the Wise Men on the look out for such signs, catching sight of a star in the night-sky. They realized that this very star was a sign that something new was happening. And so they set out immediately. No doubt many others saw the star at the same time. Yet the Wise Men were the only ones who were prepared to act and leave their home-country and security behind them. Because they agreed to let go of all this, they were able to find the very answer that they had been waiting for. They too saw the child with Mary and Joseph in their state of complete helplessness and yet fell on their knees before him.

Later in the Temple, Mary and Joseph were once again to experience their own powerlessness. For the Jews, the Temple was the center of their faith. It was God's throne on earth, a symbol of His presence amongst them. All parents therefore would come to the Temple to dedicate their first-born son. As a sacrifice on behalf of their child, the poorest people had to offer a pair of doves. This was all that Mary and Joseph could afford. What an extraordinary way for God to humble Himself by letting His only Son be valued at no more than a pair of doves - and later, at thirty pieces of silver.

As an adult, Jesus was to reject this kind of exploitation of God the Father by the priests, the learned, and the rich. The basis of his attack on the Temple and the religious leaders of his time was that they denied access to God to the ordinary people and above all to the poor. Jesus was later to overturn the tables of the money-changers and to drive out the tradesmen. He was to condemn all of the bloody sacrifices which only the rich could afford and which they claimed as the only means of obtaining God's forgiveness. For him, God's grace was not simply reserved for those with enough money to buy a calf or a lamb. God would not allow Himself to be bought. God gave Himself to everybody and especially to the poorest, to the hungriest and the thirstiest, to those who were most able to receive Him. This is why He gave His Son for the price of two doves, the offering the poor could afford.

It was also there in the Temple that Simeon, who had renounced all worldly goods and only looked forward to the coming of the Savior, understood the full meaning of salvation when he took this poor child in his arms. Yet, at the same time, Simeon foretold the rejection and turmoil that Jesus would cause when he grew up. He prophesied that many would fall because Jesus' coming would not merely have a religious impact. It would affect every aspect of social and political life. Herod, who held on to power by violence, understood this only too well. He instinctively hated this child and was prepared to kill him, because he knew that Jesus, this child of misery, would put his own power in danger.

It stands to reason that by giving hope to the marginalized, this new-born child would reawaken the worst fears and rivalries amongst those who had the most to lose. He would rekindle the hostilities and anxiety of those who had never learned to deprive themselves or to get down on their knees. It is hard to imagine the anguish which would haunt the powerful from then on. How awful for them to realize that one child, just by his very existence, could give birth to new ideas, could lead to debates, to changes of heart, and therefore to renouncement of possessions.

3. Mary and Joseph, Parents who strip off the superfluous.

Don't we feel in every family this experience of learning to give up things, when we accept each other for what we are, each one of us with our own emotions, personality, and aspirations? Jesus, in his flesh, went through exactly the same apprenticeship. He experienced this deprivation when his parents were forced to flee into Egypt; he learned what it meant in the village of Nazareth in Galilee, as he grew in grace and wisdom under the watchful eyes of his parents and neighbors.

Galilee was no peaceful paradise. Many of the Zealots, who were in open rebellion against Roman rule and Herod's collaboration with the pagans, came from this area. Galilee had also seen the birth of a popular baptist movement, the Nazarenes, who were opposed to the Pharisees' movement which had become more and more extreme and hard-line. Joseph and Mary must have been close to this baptist movement, which was already calling for people to be converted and baptized as a sign of purification, irrespective of whether they were Jews, Samaritans or pagan Roman soldiers. By going to John for baptism and later baptizing in his own right, Jesus was clearly distancing himself from the Temple practices, in order to make it clear that he was worshipping God the Father in Spirit and in Truth at the risk of losing everything.

But let us return to Jesus' family and look at the world in which they lived. This environment will, in fact, enable us to better understand their true identity.

Jesus knew the people in his parables. He knew the poor woman searching all over her house for the silver coin that she had lost and calling together her friends and neighbors to celebrate when she had found it. Wasn’t she one of the poor women his mother knew so well in Nazareth? The shepherd who left his ninety-nine sheep to go and look for the one that was lost, must also have been one of those known to Jesus. Then there was the beggar, Lazarus, the widow who went on complaining until she wore down the corrupt judge to win her case against the man who was exploiting her. These were all local people. The poor widow, who put her two little copper coins into the offertory-box in the Temple, was known to Jesus. That is why he could be sure that, "She gave more than the others, because the others put in what they had to spare of their riches; but she, poor as she is, put in what she had to live on".

Jesus lived alongside all of these people during his childhood and adolescence because his parents lived among them. He had seen for himself, the casual laborers waiting to be hired each day at the vineyards. He had seen for himself their despair as the end of the day approached and they were still waiting. He knew parents who used to go out secretly after dark to a friend's house to beg for some bread in order to feed their children. He knew that neighbor who was willing to give, perhaps more out of irritation than kindness. These were the kind of people that Jesus' family lived with. These were the poor people who taught him little by little where his mission lay.

In the countryside around Galilee with its fertile fields and luxurious vineyards, the ordinary people were exploited by the big landowners who made their lives unbearable. It was here that Jesus learned that the strong exploit the weak and that the weak in their turn exploit those who are weaker still. He reminds us of this in the parable of the unjust steward, who, despite the extraordinary generosity of his master in releasing him from his debt, had another person thrown into prison over a tiny sum.

Jesus had lived through all of these events; they were part of his life. He had suffered in the flesh because of them and through them had learned about people and about the ways of the world. He had learned that if he took the side of the ordinary people with whom he belonged and of the very poorest of the poor, then he would be sacrificing his whole life. He had sensed from experience that there was no other way to avoid being trapped by those with power and intellect. He had learned from living with his parents that this was what he had to do to make sure that no one, however poor, was left out and that he would bring everyone to salvation.

Jesus had learned from Mary and Joseph about being attentive towards other people and feeling one's heart melting out of pity towards a people without a shepherd. This much is clear even if the Gospels tell us little about their life together. Mary's reaction at Cana is a telling example of how sensitive she was. It was Mary and Joseph who taught Jesus that you never give a stone to someone who wants a piece of bread or a snake to someone asking for a fish or a scorpion instead of an egg.

It was living in a very poor family and having to do without things that made Jesus sensitive to the suffering of others, to their sickness and infirmities, to their hunger and to the contempt heaped on them. His mother, who "treasured all of these things in her heart," understood his mission in life. She knew that she had to mould Jesus' heart so that he could offer it to the world. Just as we should all mould our children’s hearts, so that tomorrow they may be a source of hope for the world.

Jesus developed his understanding of his mission from seeing the way in which his parents lived out their daily lives. Growing up in a modest family, he learned what it was to go without, to be of service to other people, and to share things with them. At his parents' side, who gave up everything for love, he learned how to love his stricken people and in particular the poorest amongst them. Giving out of love ran so deep in him that he would even give up his own family.

4. Washing the Disciples' Feet, an Essential Act of Renouncement.

St. Mark reminds us that there was a time when Jesus' mother became frightened and tried to hold him back. "Who is my mother? Who are my brothers?" was his reply, "Whoever does the will of my Father". On another occasion Jesus said that, "Whoever loves his father or mother more than me is not fit to be my disciple". His rule of life was to risk everything, to leave everything behind, just as Mary and Joseph had done, to put himself on the bottom rung of the ladder, so that others could be freed and that everyone without exception could be saved.

Jesus showed us what it means to serve other people, when he washed the Disciples' feet. The Disciples were his new family, "I no longer call you servants but friends, because I have made known to you what I have learned from the Father."

He built up this family step by step, calling the Disciples one after the other. He made it in the image of his own family so that it too would bring salvation to the whole world, as did his own. And when the hour came to live a decisive moment with them, a moment of fear and distress, a moment of abandonment in which all would need one another desperately in order to hold on and to keep on believing and loving against all hope, Jesus did what his mother and Joseph had taught him : he divested and humbled himself. He took a basin of water and a towel and knelt down in front of his disciples and started to wash their feet.

When it was time to wash their feet, Jesus served his Disciples as his parents had served him, and had made him into the man he was. He divested himself just as his parents had done to prepare his future. Peter did not want to be served in this way, "Are you going to wash my feet, Lord?" he cried, "Never at any time will you wash my feet!" Jesus answered him: "If I do not wash your feet, you will have nothing in common with me." Why did he say this? "Because if you are not cleansed, then you will be unable to love." By washing the disciples' feet Jesus reminded them of the forgiveness without which love is impossible. He reminded them of humility and of what it means to forget the injustices and wrongs done to us.

By washing their feet, Jesus was doing more than serving, he was offering reconciliation. Any family lasts because of its constant acts of reconciliation, its small daily gestures of renewed attention for one another. In this way we learn to express our feelings; we show family members how much they count in our lives and how much we care for them.

It is impossible to grow in love without such forgiveness, reconciliation, and cleansing. The beginning of every Mass, of every service of the Holy Communion means a renewal of this washing of the feet. The renewal happens when we ask God to forgive us our sins as we forgive others and receive their forgiveness in return.

Washing the Disciples' feet proclaimed in a tangible way that love of which Christ would give us a perfect image. That love goes to the very end, all the way to giving one's life for those whom one loves. When Jesus said to Peter, "If I do not wash your feet, you will have nothing in common with me", he also meant: "If you cannot accept my friendship, how will you accept that I am going to die for you and that you will be saved by my death?"

It took that act of love, which at the same time reconciled and purified, which all at once respected and put everyone on the same level, for the Disciples to understand**,** in the days to come, that everything was fulfilled in love. It required that act of love for the disciples to realize that from then on they would have to humble themselves, to meet others in a spirit of poverty, humility and truth, in order to save them.

In washing their feet, Jesus set them a concrete example, "You call me Teacher and Lord and it is right that you do so, because that is who I am. I your Lord and Teacher have just washed your feet. You then should wash one another's feet".

The Church must constantly live in this state of poverty, humility and freedom, because it conveys the living message of Jesus. And the family, which is the crucible for this message, must live in the same state the Church is expected to live.

5. The Family - a School for the Love which Liberates.

Since the family is the first community joining people in a common destiny, where they experience their apprenticeship in love, it is the place where the will to love, and to build men and women capable of loving in their turn, is put into practice.

We often tend to think that serving our brothers must lead us beyond our familiar horizons, beyond our families. We often feel that commitment means first of all getting involved in alien territory. However, the life of Christ tells us something completely different.

Christ reminds us that our first commitment is to our nearest and dearest, to our own community, our parish and our neighborhood. He reminds us that we live as Christians to the extent that we look for him first and foremost amongst the poorest people in our parishes, neighborhoods, and families. It is only when they are strengthened by this daily experience of love, reconciliation, and service that both the family and the Church will be a sign of salvation for the world.

True divestment means first of all loving those who are closest to us. Only the love of those closest to us can prevent us from becoming individualistic, egotistical, idealistic or self-righteous; from deceiving ourselves. Only such love can stop us from taking ourselves too seriously.

I have always been struck by the fact that the washing of feet draws us inwards, within our inner selves, our own families, our parishes, and our communities. It is through the washing of the feet that I have come to understand that reaching out to help other people at the expense of those nearest to us is a false move. For us as Christians, the Church is and must always be the community which we love and respect above all others. The Church is often criticized for being too inward-looking and for not being concerned enough with social and political issues, for not standing up for solidarity outside its own walls. But what do we expect when we ask this of the Church of Jesus Christ? Doesn't Christ expect infinitely more of His Church?

Isn't the question that we should rather be asking ourselves and the Church how to join the poorest people and how to love them? How can we find Jesus Christ amongst the poorest people of our time, so that we can give our love to the Savior? If we put the right questions to the Church, we would enable it to transform social and political issues and the question of solidarity into love for the poor. It is here that the Church's real and specific task lies. Our questioning should make the Church curious, impatient and loving with respect to the poor. Otherwise, our questions are of no use to her.

The Church will transform everything into love if it is itself in love with the poor. Families in poverty themselves will show us the way. This is just what a poor and illiterate woman did in London when she said to a volunteer whom she had gone to see to get help for her daughter: "Before you go and see my daughter, go and talk to your own friends first". She didn't say, "Your fellow team-members", or "your fellow workers", or "Your colleagues", but "Your friends".

We do not always realize just what the poorest expect from us. They expect us to be people who bring them hope and love. The families in the shanty-town of Noisy-le-Grand often used to ask us, "Why are you doing this"? And we would answer, "Because we love you". To be able to bring hope is to know how to love and to love first of all those with whom we live and

work. Without such love at the outset, our further commitments have no meaning, they lead nowhere; they are a form of escapism.

As Christians, we are the ones who are called upon to debunk the debates about society, politics, and solidarity by bringing out their true dimension which is love. Of course, it is vitally important to walk with the poorest as companions. It is also crucial that in our social and political milieus we make a stand against injustice. However, as Christians, we can never be content just to denounce and accuse. We must rather oppose injustice by understanding and being open-minded; by changing our ways of living, acting, and speaking so that others may accept doing likewise.

The family remains the best place to learn to practice this. In fact being part of a family compels us to question ourselves constantly. It leads us to live to the fullest simple, everyday gestures. It continually pushes us to be open to others so that they may fully develop what is essential to them. Making others feel welcome forces us to make room for them in our hearts and time for them in our lives. Our brothers and sisters, husband and wife, our children and close friends, all those who are part of our wider family, demand this of us. Nothing could ever replace such a unique school for life. Together, Family and Church must be determined to build homes and communities where love flourishes, where all have such mutual love that all they want is to see each other happy and truly "fulfilled". We shall manage to do this insofar as we look at the world through the eyes of the poor, insofar as we act like the poor, making gestures which are true to life and call us to divesting ourselves.

We are invited to divest ourselves of hatred, criticism, and pre-conceived ideas which stop us getting close to each other. We must find simple gestures which leave the other person free to find his way and to love in his turn. We must act as the launching pad from which others can take flight freely, without trying to dictate to them ahead of time the promised land which they should reach.

This is the core of total detachment, a freely embraced poverty of spirit, which puts the other person first, which calls for a look of tenderness that allows the other person to feel loved and respected and pushed to the fore. This calls for a loving outlook which enables the other person to commit himself in his turn. What grace, if the other's commitment is mine too and thus becomes a common commitment.

This pathway is precisely the one which the Christian Family is required to take. It is also the way to take for all men and women of good will who are entirely committed to the building of a more human world, a world where every single person can be a source of love for those around him, able to live a life of love and build a world of love.

And so you see that here we are concerned with something infinitely greater than ourselves, which encompasses all of humanity. It is the question of our co-existence, of our living with our fellow human beings. It is a question of that kind of co-existence which enables the other person to be continually present in our lives and which makes us strive to see others succeed in their turn in creating and sharing love.

For a great love can never be kept to oneself.

II THE FAMILY, THE PATHWAY TO EVANGELIZATION

Introduction - The Poorest Families, Messengers of Christ

Christmas in the Beauchamp's family had been just like any other day, perhaps even worse. There was absolutely nothing to tell you that it was a holiday, not even a special meal to make them forget their misery for a while and allow them eat to their heart's content. However, for us who are gathered here today, the Beauchamp's spoiled Christmas might help clarify the true meaning of Christ's Nativity and the purpose of his coming to live and die amongst the poor so that all men might have life.

Some time after that Christmas Eve, I asked Mr. Beauchamp how he had felt about Christmas. He lowered his head and gave no answer. He thought for a while, and then told me very quietly: "We had nothing, it was awful..." Then after a moment's pause he continued: "Perhaps that is what Christmas is all about. Perhaps that was what Jesus' Christmas was like." And he who had never spoken about God nor shown the slightest interest in religion before, continued: "It's true, we all need to be saved; we're really pitiful failures." What a revelation coming from this frail, badly-dressed, and unobtrusive man, who has such difficulty in expressing himself. This revelation, all the very poor would disclose it to us, if only we knew how to listen to them and to look upon them with love.

One day, tired out by his journey, Jesus sat down by Jacob's well... To the Samaritan woman who offered him a drink he said, "If only you knew what God gives and who it is that is asking you for a drink, you would have asked him and he would have given you life-giving water". By meditating upon this encounter and Jesus' words, we will come to understand the fundamental nature of the change required of us in our relationship with the poor. In truth, he, who was in greatest need, is the one with most to give. We, who thought that we had something to give, are the ones who need to receive. Our own need for salvation thus becomes a means of sharing our faith in Jesus Christ. Evangelizing the poor, the mission which Christ gave to his Church, becomes a question of allowing the poor to bring the Good News to us. If we united our lives with those of the poorest, they would pass God's Gift back to us.

Every family, no matter how crushed it may be by poverty, is in fact the bearer of a unique message, that of Jesus the miserable one, of Jesus made wretched in every way, yet without sin. The Church is continually reminding us of this: every family in deepest poverty has the right to know that it is Christ's message.

By your presence here, you demonstrate that you are asking yourselves that very question, "How in our own families can we live out the reality of Christ's message of liberation"? I would like to broaden this question by adding, "How can we become the ones who search out and bring to light the message of Christ amongst the most deprived families"?

6. The Family of Jesus as Missionary.

Last year here at Erpent, the Most Reverend Houssiau reminded us that, "The family is not simply a symbol; it is also the place where the Church can be brought to life". It is in its family that a child learns to believe and to hope, to let love grow in his heart. the Most Reverend Houssiau also reminded us that God has confidence in every one of our families,

that He knows that each life, however broken it might be, can be restored to its original beauty despite its weakness and suffering. The Church has always borne witness to this. It holds up Christ's family as the model for the Christian family and therefore for the family charged with a mission, with the conviction that every family is called to the same mission.

There is a German proverb which says, "An apple never falls far from the tree-trunk". It is a way of explaining why children are so like their parents, why they so often follow in their footsteps and why one generation carries on where the other left off. It was the same for Jesus, who chose to be like us and share in every aspect of human life.

But as we have already seen, the family cannot be thought of simply in terms of a man, a woman and their children. The family belongs to a particular milieu, to a society with which it is in constant contact by virtue of shared ideas, feelings and plans. So when we speak of Jesus, we are implicitly making a reference to his family, his milieu and the people he lived with. Christ's was a close-knit family, because they knew that God had given them a message which they had to pass on to those nearest to them, to their people, and to all mankind.

Mary was the first one to receive the message at the Annunciation. The Angel told her, "Your child will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High God. The Lord God will make him a king as his ancestor David was. He will be the king of the descendants of Jacob forever... For this reason, the holy child will be called the Son of God".

If Joseph took Mary for his wife, it was because he too had been given an assurance by God that this child, who was not his own, would be the Savior of his people. Therefore, Jesus' family was by virtue of its vocation an integral part of a people and of the history of the people of God.

As it follows the example of Jesus' family, every family bears a message of love to pass on to the world. Every child, rich or poor, carries a message for the future. In every family and in every child, there is something of infinite value for those around them and for all of mankind. Our society shows that it does not always understand this by the way in which we try to arrange things so that the poorest women won't have children.

Love grows as it is shared; it is in giving love that a family shapes and strengthens itself. It was by dealing energetically with the problems of her day that Mary grew in her belief that her child really was the Savior. When she talked to her cousin, she didn't even mention the child she was expecting. Instead, she spoke of the Salvation which, through her, was already present with her people. She talked about, "...The great things the Almighty has done for me... He has scattered the proud in their conceit... He has brought down the mighty from their thrones and lifted up the lowly. He has filled the hungry with good things and sent the rich away empty".

Mary and Joseph's mission from then on was to make the message known. God would open the shepherds' eyes. They would see in that poor child wrapped in swaddling clothes by his mother that peace was possible from then on for those who wanted it, and that even the heavens would burst forth with joy.

Then they would have to make the message known to the Magi from the East. Mary and Joseph would explain its meaning to them. This child was God's Gift. Every child bears

witness to human love, but love is always at risk if it turns in on itself. The child in the manger was a gift, a God-given gift of love.

As bearers of the message, Mary and Joseph went to the Temple to offer their child to God. Simeon, the godly old man, and Anna the prophetess saw before them a poor child whose parents could only afford two doves as a sacrifice. It was God who opened their eyes and filled them with his way of looking at things. Simeon and Anna were people of faith and hope. They had complete confidence in God. They were waiting for a new world; they didn't need Mary and Joseph to say anything. Simeon and Anna saw and believed.

When I think of Mary, I can picture Carol, a young woman from Haiti. Without saying anything, she took me by the hand and led me into her little hut in the shanty-town of Port au Prince. She lived there with her mother, her brothers, and sisters. She wanted me to see her new-born baby. He was there on the bed, dressed like a little prince, whilst his mother was only wearing a torn dress. I wondered how she had managed it. Her face was just a big smile, full of tenderness and hope, as Mary's must have been when she went to the Temple, poor but happy to see her son acknowledged for who he was.

The secret of Simeon's and Anna's faith resides in the fact that Mary and Joseph only had a poor child to present at the Temple, and that he was worth his weight in gold, more than all the wisdom and power in the world. However, Simeon and Anna were well aware of how cruel the world could be to children, especially if they were known to be messengers of Salvation. Simeon foresaw that the child would encounter great difficulties in accomplishing the mission assigned to him by God. He foresaw that his poverty would be scandalous to those who were expecting a Messiah coming in power and glory. Simeon could see that he would be crushed and that Mary his mother would have her heart pierced by sorrow.

Very little is said in the Gospels about the early years of Jesus' life. Was his family inactive? Of course not! In Nazareth, Mary and Joseph prepared Jesus for his mission. They were very much involved in the life of their people. Joseph, the carpenter, was well-known in the area, no doubt because of his trade but also, as the Gospels tell us, because he was a righteous man and therefore a committed believer.

"An apple never falls far from the tree-trunk", we said just now, "A good tree bears good fruits, you will be known by your fruits". In this way Jesus' adult life enables us to find out about his parents' life. Now we begin to recognize the picture which the Gospels had revealed to us with light brushstrokes. St. Matthew has already told us that Joseph, having discovered that Mary was pregnant, did not want to disgrace her publicly. He made plans to break off the engagement privately. This was not the usual way in which people behaved in Jewish society when faced with such a disappointment. This shows us that Joseph had clear ideas about justice and that, for him, justice went far beyond the requirements of the Law. His adopted son would always remember the lesson and would later proclaim, "I have not come to abolish the Law, but to fulfil it".

In addition, Joseph who had been taught the Word of God, had his own ideas about his condition as a poor person, about the situation of the Jewish people in Galilee, oppressed not only by the Romans but also by the mighty amongst the Jewish people. He had his own views about the way the Pharisees and other powerful people conducted themselves. Jesus made Joseph's ideas his own. If he made a stand against the people with power, it was because with Mary and Joseph he had lived through the experience of the abuses which were

pulling their people apart. It was from them and those around them, that he had learned all that he knew about the discrepancy between the conduct of the elite and the teachings of the Scriptures.

We can be quite sure that the burning issues of their day were the subject of Mary and Josephs' prayers. The Romans, the Pharisees, Herod, the Zealots, the people being systematically ground down into poverty, the money-lenders bleeding the peasants dry with charges they could not afford, the lack of any protection for women, widows, or orphans, the arrogance of the people of the Temple faced by families without the pennies to pay their tithes or to conform to the rituals... Mary and Joseph were intimately acquainted with all of these matters. They, who already knew that Jesus was the Savior, became bearers of hope, preached and practiced justice, brotherhood, and truth.

Jesus Christ would outgrow his adopted father. But like every father, Joseph would gain a greater stature as a man and as a father as his son grew up. He too must have grown in wisdom and justice.

7. The Family which wants its Son to be Greater than Itself.

Being a family with a mission, Mary and Joseph were to discover all too soon that their son had to devote himself to his own mission, "Didn't you know that I had to be in my Father's house?", he said to them at the age of twelve, when they were worried sick by his disappearance. He was very attached to them. However, the Annunciation, the Incarnation, and the Presentation at the Temple would mean nothing to them, if they had not helped him to see things through to the very end, beyond his family, his neighborhood and the little town of Nazareth. If he was the Messiah, it would be at the Temple that everything would be played out. It would be in God's house that God would make His ways known.

Jesus had asked, "Who is my mother? Who are my brothers?" Immediately, he answered, "Whoever does what my Father in heaven wants him to", - not in word only, not by expressing fine-sounding sentiments, but by getting involved in bringing God's Kingdom into existence.

Ever since Jesus had left Nazareth, Mary's commitment, would be to devote herself to spreading the message, to supporting her son from now on in his mission and accompanying him into the midst of abandonment amongst the poor, the crippled, the wretched, and the lost souls.

The Gospels tell us that Mary was at Jesus' side amongst the group of women who accompanied him. No doubt, all the signs foreshadowed the fact that he would look towards his own people, that he would choose his Disciples from amongst those without qualifications or prestige. They were the first to be chosen in an endless line of priests, religious and dedicated laity, whose parents would often say wistfully, "Our son, our daughter, were so intelligent, honest, and skillful. They had a fine future in front of them. We sacrificed everything to give them a good start in life. And now they're throwing it all away".

One day a mother said to me, "My daughter became a volunteer in the middle of all these rejects! Father, you just can't imagine anything like that! She's going to come home with me or else I'm going to sue you!" How often I've been accused by parents of leading their

children astray, of taking them into the depths of misery to live alongside families without hearth or home, amongst starving and illiterate children. "She is so beautiful", said another mother to me while talking about her daughter, who was a volunteer with the Fourth World Movement, "She's crazy; she's going to throw her life away".

It is not difficult to imagine the family of Jesus feeling uneasy about his choice of mixing with the "rejects". Wouldn't Joseph and Mary have sometimes said to themselves, "He's out of his mind, what a waste"?

Yet Mary did follow Jesus as the Gospels tell us. She was always willing to help him carry his message to the world. The first opportunity came during a wedding. Jesus had been invited to the feast with his mother and his companions, when suddenly everything went wrong. As so often happens, today just as in the past, a poor family's celebration was about to end in humiliation. The family had run out of wine. They had no money to buy any more, even though they were surrounded by vineyards. How could they help the friends who had invited them out of such an embarrassing situation?

Prompted by God, Mary thought of her son. Everything came back to her: the Annunciation, Joseph, Bethlehem, Herod, Anna and Simeon, the Doctors of the Law astounded that a child of poverty should understand the ways of God so well. It all crossed her mind again. She gave him her full support and told the family, "Do whatever he tells you. Have faith!" And Jesus answered her expectations: "I am going to do as you wish because God, the Father, tells me to. Now He wants to reveal His Son."

From that day forward Mary's path was mapped out. Even though the Gospels evoke only the family's fears, before Jesus' intervention at Cana, we know that Mary withdrew into the background, that she risked everything so that his greatness could be made known. She could not have done otherwise throughout Jesus' public ministry. It was to be at the foot of the Cross that she would affirm by her presence that the Angel had not deceived her. Standing beneath the Cross, Mary bore witness. She affirmed that the Angel had spoken the truth when he said, "He will be great... The Lord God will make him a king as his ancestor David was. He will be the king of the descendants of Jacob forever, his kingdom will never end"! But Mary also affirmed the truth of the words of the prophet Isaiah, "He will be despised and rejected by mankind, a man of sorrows, a ruined man".

8. The Family of Jesus as Guardians of Salvation.

Mary, the missionary, was Mary humbled, stripped of everything, who accepted the scandal that her heart had predicted would happen ever since her distress at Bethlehem. From then on a new form of motherhood welled up inside her, for the Disciples and for all mankind. She was the first irrefutable witness to the death and resurrection of her son.

And so this family, Mary, Joseph, and Jesus, as every family would be from then on, was a bearer of hope in the future, a witness that God does not abandon His people. Elizabeth, the shepherds and the Magi, had all been convinced. Simeon and Anna and the Disciples had all proclaimed it, and the centurion at the foot of the cross was to proclaim his faith. The scandal was spilling over everywhere. And that scandal is God Himself, for those who see through God's eyes because they believe.

Mary and Joseph's vocation had been to show that Jesus, despite all the evidence to the contrary, in his poverty, his misery and his complete self-denial, from the manger to the cross, was the Savior. Despite all the conflicting evidence, poverty love and hope did go hand in hand. That is why we can address Mary in our prayers as:
Our Lady of those who have nothing,
Our Lady of those who are nothing,
Our Lady of those who can do nothing,
Our Lady of all people,
Pray for us.

9. Leaving Everything Behind to Evangelize the Poor.

Every family is a source of light; every family is called to spread its message beyond its time on earth. Mary, entrusted to John's care, became the Mother of the Church, which under her care, would become with the passing centuries, the Church of the poor, as Vatican II puts it. The Church identifies itself with Mary and seeks to become like her, as we are reminded in the encyclical, "Lumen Gentium."

Still, to become like Mary, means to humble oneself, to live out the Magnificat each day, to glorify God and put the conceited in their place, to re-establish justice for the poorest. They represent Jesus in our midst. Still, as Mary did for her son, so in every part of the Church, we must make the most disadvantaged families our most valued partners. The first duty of every Christian family, indeed of every family, is to ensure that the poorest people have the means to take up their mission of love.

A mother, who had struggled for many years against poverty in an effort to keep her family together, said when she began to tell us her life-story, "I hope that all those who've been through what I've been through, will understand when they read this book, that they are not the only ones to have suffered. We are human beings. We need people who have the courage to believe in us and give us a chance to take care of our own children."

If we believe in the poorest people, we will discover how much faith, hope and charity are written into their lives, how they long for a spiritual life. For the Holy Spirit dwells in them as well. Yet they are deprived of the means to show us and even to prove it to themselves. That is why their faith, their hope and their charity are such a wonder. The Church should be falling over itself to bring them the Good News.

I remember a man who was devastated when his children were taken away from him because he was said to have neglected them. He was a member of a group of families involved with the Fourth World Movement. Thanks to this group, he had been able to regain his dignity. He felt responsible for other poverty-stricken families. And so each morning, on his away to work, he would go out of his way to wake up some children and make sure that they got to school on time. How could you fail to want to reassure such a man that he belongs to Jesus Christ?

The evangelization of the poorest is a duty for the missionary family. For the very poor have the right to love and to give their help to those worse off than themselves. It is our duty, but it is also our good fortune to share this Good News with them. For in return, we must allow ourselves to be evangelized by the poorest people, to learn from them that faith, hope,

and charity are not merely a passing experience. Evangelizing means a serious long-term commitment to stand by them.

Extreme poverty is disgusting. How can you believe in God, when no one believes in you? How can you live out God's story, when your life is torn to shreds because you have to struggle to get by from day to day? How can you imagine what God is like, when your horizons are confined to the slum, the street, the grocery store, or the bar? When you have no possible way of making any kind of plans for your family, your social or spiritual life, how can you make sense of events in terms of God's eternal plan?

A Church, which recognizes that its first vocation is to make a preferential option for the poorest, cannot stay away from the areas where poverty is at its worst. It must bring faith, hope, and charity into deserted areas, housing projects, slums, and places where squatters live, wherever Christ's body suffers most today. The poorest families are waiting for other Marys and Josephs to come to them, new heralds of the Good News. They are waiting for families who are prepared to give up everything to bury themselves in the heart of the poorest areas, even at the price of continually humbling themselves and giving up their possessions.

"What do you want from me?" Madame Garcia asked a volunteer from the Fourth World Movement. Madame Garcia lived in appalling conditions with her family in a poor part of Marseilles. "What is it that you want? You're a pretty girl; you've got a father and a mother, a roof over your head and a chair to sit on. Tell me what you want from me"? The volunteer said nothing. She stayed rooted to the spot, completely at a loss for words. So before she left, Madame Garcia took her in her arms and kissed her.

The action of the Church and that of families working alongside the most deprived must be a commitment like this, instilled with tenderness but also with perseverance. Otherwise, how is Madame Garcia going to believe in the Church, when it says in Christ's name: "I chose you first and loved you first. Now, love one another in my name"?

Whenever it repeats Jesus' words, the Church will only be telling the truth if Christ is present in our families, as a family-member. He is not some guest with whom we speak vaguely from time to time. He must be a friend whom we find seated around the table in prayer, whom we greet in the morning, whom we meet as adults in the Church's daily worship and in the evening when we pray together as a family. He must be a friend whom we consult before making big decisions, especially those which might have repercussions for the poorest people. It must be the same in school if you are a teacher, in your place of work, in political life, in your organizations and Labor Unions. Above all, it must be true in the Church.

10. The Family as Guardian of this Heritage.

If some people are called to leave everything behind, others are needed to support them in their commitment. Getting involved is never a purely personal matter. The whole Church must search for the poorest, for the lost sheep. Its responsibility and therefore ours too, is to support those whom we send out amongst the wretched of the earth. Together we must teach each other how to offer true charity to our suffering brothers and sisters, otherwise the fire we light will soon die down in the face of disappointments and set-backs. To abandon those whom we have befriended is worse than to have stayed away. A broken promise does not help the other person to grow; on the contrary, it increases his misery.

Your family is the testing-ground of this education. Taking shape there before you is the inheritance which you pass on to your children, and, through them, to the world, and to the poorest people, to those who will be the Church of tomorrow. What kind of legacy will you leave for your children and for the world?

I would like to share with you my deep conviction that in you, in all of the families gathered here today, we can see replicas of Jesus' family, which took such pains, patiently day by day, to teach their son to love the most humble people. Starting today, you are the testing-ground for the love of the weakest. You and your families are the ideal place where that heritage can be guaranteed.

However, the first step will always be to turn to those nearest to you. Who is the loneliest person in my family? Who are the children whom the others don't want to play with? Which are the families in my area who are looked down on? Which are the families from my parish who never come to Church, because they think that it is a Church of the rich?

How fortunate the Church is to have found you, and thousands of Christian families like you, marching together, thousands of families seeking to be missionary families. How fortunate for the poorest families, if you are prepared to get involved with them wherever you are, if you decide to build a society with them where justice and brotherhood reign.

And where Jesus can dwell amongst us.

Note:

1 This text has been translated from the original French version, entitled, "Vivre l'Évangile dans la Famille," in the Collection Cahiers de Baillet, Éditions Quart Monde, Paris, France, 1993, 46 pp. It represents a speech that Joseph Wresinski wrote for the Fifth Meeting Day of ANPAP (the Association des Parents, Anciens et Amis du Patro) which took place on March 12, 1988 in Erpent, Belgium. It was delivered in Erpent by Alwine de Vos van Steenwijk, President of the International Movement ATD Fourth World, shortly after Father Joseph's death (on February 14, 1988).

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