
« THE POOR WILL ALWAYS BE WITH YOU »



The words of Jesus which St. Matthew records in his gospel (chapter 26) have always intrigued me: they sometimes seem to reflect the reality of poverty as some kind of fate which we can in no way escape. Other times, we realize that Jesus knows so well about humans that he knew beforehand that there would always be poor people on earth. I prefer the second interpretation, because the Chosen People remembered this, from the Law of Moses: "There shall be no poor among you!" Better yet, proof that Messiah had already come could be verified in deed: "Go back and report to John what you hear and see: the blind recover their sight, cripples walk, lepers are cured, the deaf hear, dead are raised to life, and the poor have the good news preached to them" (Mt. 11:4-5). We also know that the first Christians held everything in common.

BASIC DIMENSION OF EVANGELISATION

The poor are so very discreet that we often have a difficult time identifying them! They are so retiring that some people who are otherwise well intentioned but living in a totally different world, doubt their very existence. For over fifteen years I was the director of pastoral social services for the Diocese of Québec: year in, year out, my primary mission was not only to raise the awareness of clergy and laity to the plight of the poor, the unemployed, those on social assistance, society's "rejects," and the marginalised, but with those concerned, to find directions for the future by developing self-help networks. When in 1983 diocesan authorities, at the behest of our pastoral office, launched a research and participation project on justice and faith, several Christians were literally shaken in their faith. For some of them, questions of justice and solidarity with the poor were totally absent from their daily concerns. It was especially community self-help groups that were catalysts enabling us to take on this basic aspect of our Christian faith. The statement of the (1971) World Synod on Justice pointed out this mission: "The struggle for justice and participation in transforming the world truly appears to be a basic dimension of the preaching of the Gospel which is the mission of the Church for the redemption of humankind, and its liberation from every kind of oppression."

GROWING POVERTY

Media recently reported how much poverty has increased in our country, especially child and youth poverty. A sign of this is the growing number of needy students resorting to food banks and soup kitchens for survival. Requests to me for help are spiralling upward; since the diocesan budget is so small, I cannot refer these poor people there. From personal gifts I try to respond as best I can, referring them also to the soup kitchen, the food bank, and the shelter for the homeless. These, however, are but symbolic gestures, compared to the great number of requests for help. Our hopes and strengths are not foreign to the moral force of the Gospel which, through the Holy Spirit frees humans from all that is despair and weakness.

LOVE AND JUSTICE

It is distressing that in our country there are groups which have made justice and charity seem opposed to one another. Their comment: "We don't want your charity! We want justice!" The Christian message incorporates in man's and woman's relationship to God their attitude towards others: man's and woman's response to God's love which has saved us in Christ, has no effect without love and service to others. Love of neighbour

and justice are inseparable. Love is first and foremost an absolute requirement of justice, that is, an awareness of the dignity and rights of one's brother and sister. Justice, for its part, does not achieve its inner fullness except in love. Because every human being is a visible image of the invisible God and brother and sister of Christ, the Christian discovers in every person God Himself with His absolute requirement of justice and love. This is one teaching of the Church which we would do well to remember. In the eyes of faith, the world situation today calls us to return to this very core of our Christianity to acquire a new awareness of its true meaning and its urgent requirements. The mission to preach requires us, today, to commit ourselves radically to the total liberation of every person, within the very reality of their existence in the world. If the Christian message of love and justice does not materialise as action on behalf of love and justice, it will hardly be credible to the man and woman today.

SHARE YOUR BREAD

The prophet Isaiah was one of those sent by God to tell humans of God's designs on them: "Is this the manner of fasting I wish, of keeping a day of penance: that a man bow his head like a reed, and lie in sackcloth and ashes? Do you call this a fast, a day acceptable to the Lord? This, rather, is the fasting that I wish: releasing those bound unjustly, untying the thongs of the yoke; setting free the oppressed, breaking every yoke; sharing your bread with the hungry, sheltering the oppressed and the homeless; clothing the naked when you see them, and not turning your back on your own" (Is. 58:5-7). And the prophet Micah proclaimed "You have been told, O man, what is good, and what the Lord requires of you: only to do the right and to love goodness, and to walk humbly with your God" (Mi 6:8). How can we not go one step further in the area of justice and solidarity, in such company?

LET MUTUAL LOVE GROW!

Our desire is that the prayer of Mother Teresa become reality: "O God, make me never be the cause of suffering to others, may I never lie, never envy the riches of others, and always have a friendly feeling for every creature on earth. Whether others speak well or ill of me, whether riches come to me or not, whether I live thousands of years or surrender my spirit this very moment, may my steps never leave the path of truth. May mutual love grow in the world, and may no one ever speak ill or falsely of others. May we understand the rules of truth and goodness."

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