

The poorest of the poor, partners for a more equitable society

by Régis De Muylder

During the century now nearing its end, the human race has undoubtedly fostered the notions of peace, solidarity and human rights. For this purpose, it has established bodies transcending national borders and creating awareness that everyone is a citizen of the world. Paradoxically, this century has also attained extremes of violence and horror. Yet the paradox is only apparent, since the awareness came about precisely because conflicts grew to world proportions.

On the occasion of the 75th anniversary of the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies, the ATD Quart Monde movement¹ has been invited to join it in the study of vulnerable communities. The movement can do this only by delving into its own history, covering more than thirty-five years of commitment among the poorest people in the world.

In 1956, Father Joseph Wresinski² discovered a camp of homeless people at Noisy-le-Grand, on the outskirts of Paris. There were 252 families, cut off from the rest of the world, living in shelters made of asbestos-cement sheets, with no amenities, and with only about ten public water taps to supply water for all those in the camp. Father Joseph settled among these families and shared their living conditions.

A few years after the Second World War, the horrors of which provoked the unanimous cry of “Never again!”, Europe was rebuilding, excluding a part of the population from the society of peace and prosperity

¹ *Aide à Toute Détresse Quart Monde* (Aid to all distress in the Fourth World).

² Joseph Wresinski (1917-1988), a priest, founded the ATD Quart Monde movement in 1957.

that it claimed to be setting up. Speaking to a group of people who came to see him at Noisy-le-Grand in 1963, Father Joseph commented that: "*Society does not intend to move people out of its path, but it leaves them to one side and moves on, often without even noticing them. Thus, with no bad intentions, without any preconceived ideas, families are nevertheless thrust aside*".³

For the poorest of the poor there have always been terms, such as "isolated cases", "maladjusted individuals", changing of course over the years, but invariably conveying the idea that such people are themselves responsible for their plight. Father Joseph had always felt that this attitude was wrong; at Noisy he became convinced that it was, and said so. As a child he had known poverty; as a young priest he had witnessed the sufferings of the very poor in his parish. Later, he was to declare: "*At Noisy-le-Grand, it all began to make sense. I said to myself, these people are a nation, the nation of poverty. They are gathered together, not as part of a plan, a happy occasion, but because of their suffering. That is what unites them, shuts them off, humiliates them*".⁴

By its very existence, the "nation of poverty" challenges our society. This in itself constitutes an appeal to make contact with those people. For Father Wresinski, doing so was not entering an unknown world - on the contrary, it was rediscovering his own past, his own familiar surroundings. But he very soon recognized that he could not remain alone amid the families in the camp at Noisy. By sharing their intolerable existence, and remaining alone, he would either become repelled or would sink into apathy with them. Refusing to accept the situation, after a very short time he founded an association including the camp's inhabitants, convinced as he was that he must prompt people in all walks of life to abolish poverty. "*What could we accomplish, the families and myself, unless men and women wanting what we wanted - to eliminate poverty and its shame - rallied to our side?*"⁵

Amid the homeless, Father Joseph became utterly certain of what he had long felt: poverty destroys those who experience it. Because it destroys human beings, poverty challenges our society and calls upon it to reach out to the very poorest. "*Something has to be done ... because poverty destroys our fellow beings, and anything that destroys my fellows destroys me also*", said Father Joseph in 1963.⁶

³ J. Wresinski, *Ecrits et Paroles* (Writings and sayings), p. 161, Editions St Paul-Quart Monde, Paris, 1992.

⁴ J. Wresinski, *Les Pauvres sont l'Eglise* (The poor are the church), p. 149, Editions Le Centurion, Paris, 1983.

⁵ J. Wresinski, *ibid.*, p. 152.

And because poverty destroys human beings, contact with the very poor brings us nearer to all who are afflicted by any kind of suffering that impairs human dignity. Moreover, we cannot but be close to those who strive to win respect for the rights of all human beings.

Extreme poverty, whether in industrialized or developing countries, is a threat to all the social and family relationships that individuals normally establish with those around them. Such relationships become gravely weakened, to the point where they may break down completely, so that the very poor are in the end excluded from society. It should be pointed out at once that they do not accept this situation passively, without reacting. They struggle to prevent themselves being broken by poverty, they try to maintain ties with their friends. They do so, it is true, with pathetic resources, and with no mutual comprehension between them and the society around them, so that there is little chance of their struggle being successful.

Relations with society around them

Poor people always hope to find a school where their children will feel at ease and will learn, to find facilities (whether administrative authorities, a health centre, a social welfare office) where they will be pleasantly received, where nobody will reproach them for their poverty-stricken appearance or their difficulties in expressing themselves. Yet often we hear poor people say, "They don't understand us there - I don't want to go there, I'll be sent away". It seems that there is a gulf between society and its poorest members.

I think of a family living under a bridge in a big city in South-East Asia. Despite their intolerable living conditions, the mother, a widow, wants her children to go to school. This was possible for a time, thanks to her efforts, to support from friends and to the commitment of some teachers. But the children's attendance at school soon became irregular and finally impossible. The difficulties of daily life were a threat to the children's schooling, and we realized that the mother was afraid. Although the school has children from a nearby shanty town, her children are even more poverty-stricken than they are, and the mother doesn't want them to be ridiculed. In addition, one of the children has a skin infection — understandably, in view of the conditions in which the family lives —

⁶ J. Wresinski, *Ecrits et Paroles*, p. 171.

which does not heal in spite of a number of treatments. This makes the mother all the more fearful about the school: "I'm afraid that he will be taken away from me and placed in a centre". At the school, the children's absence has been deplored; it is pointed out that the mother is sometimes drunk, and that she does not encourage her children to take up an apprenticeship. Yet, very early every morning, the mother does her utmost to get the children ready for school - and if you live under a bridge, this demands a level of dedication that cannot be imagined by anyone who does not live in such conditions. It is true that the mother is absent when the children return from school: it is the time when she goes to the market to earn something to enable her to bring food back for the family. Moreover, since she is illiterate, how could she possibly help her children with their lessons ?

This is how a breach occurs between the very poor and the rest of society. Those in extreme poverty have an attitude that others do not understand, because they are not sufficiently aware of the lives of the poor, whose behaviour appears disordered, so that finally this disorder is thought to be the cause of their plight, when in fact it is an effect. If the lives of the poorest of the poor were better known, there would be greater understanding of what is behind such disorder. Let us consider another example, the situation of a family living in Europe.⁷

The Parin family lives in a shack infested with rats and bugs, at the far end of a village. The father has lost his job, and family allowances have ceased. The year is 1978. There is no electricity; the family fetches water from a tap in the cemetery, at the other end of the village. They try to scrape a living from small jobs performed by the father, but these are very uncertain. As long as they had a bit of money, they bought their coal. Later, the father went to the authorities to ask for a voucher for coal, but was refused and called an idler. That winter, the cemetery tap froze, and the situation was desperate. The father began to rip planks from the shack to make a fire. At that point the neighbours became worried: they informed the police, who took the children away and charged the parents with wilful negligence.

It will be asked why parents whose children were undernourished and had chilblains did not seek help from a health care facility. In fact, when they had taken their children to the hospital earlier, they had been threatened with having the children taken away if they brought them again in

⁷ This account is given in detail in the journal *Igloo-Quart Monde*, No. 110, *Pour une politique de la responsabilité collective* ("Towards a policy of collective responsibility"), published by Quart Monde. We here use the fictitious name given to the family in the journal.

poor condition. Living in such destitution meant that the family sank down into another world, a world outside society, where nothing linked them any longer to other people.

The social context

In the poorest districts, in shanty towns where poverty is widespread, it can be seen, if one takes the time to get to know the inhabitants well, that the poverty is not uniform.

Let us take the case of a shanty town situated beside a public refuse dump in a city of Latin America. Families there live alongside the refuse, in shelters made of planks, corrugated iron sheets, cardboard or rags. The poverty is so great that one wonders how anyone can live there. Then, as one meets the people who share this existence, one gradually realizes that not everyone is equally deprived, as evidenced by examples from specific areas of daily life (family life, which we consider fundamental, will be dealt with in the following chapter).

School: All the children living in these places have to work, if only to help their parents and under the parents' supervision. They are forced to do so because of their generally precarious situation. But this does not necessarily mean that they receive no schooling. A child may work for a few hours and go to school for part of the day. So there is a balance, albeit a fragile one. When poverty is too great, this balance is destroyed, and schooling is no longer possible.

Organization of social life: In spite of the indigence, life is organized round work, and committees are even formed to obtain improvements in the surroundings. We then observe that the very poorest people take little if any part in such organization and so receive none of its benefits.

Many more examples could be given, concerning access to health care, relations with the authorities, etc. What is clear is that the greater the poverty the less those affected are able to assume their responsibilities and enjoy their rights as citizens. Indeed, extreme poverty could be described in terms of the enjoyment of rights and the exercise of responsibilities, it being understood, of course, that we refer to the rights and responsibilities devolving normally on citizens in the context under consideration.⁸

⁸ In the report "*Grande pauvreté et précarité économique et sociale*" (*Extreme poverty and economic and social insecurity*), presented by J. Wresinski to the French economic and social council, the following definition of extreme poverty is given: "Insecurity is the absence of one or more of the assured conditions enabling individuals or families to

This difficulty in exercising rights and responsibilities increases as poverty becomes greater. There is not, in fact, any strict demarcation between poverty and extreme poverty. It is therefore of interest to consider the place of the poorest in a group of poor people. The conduct of the group as a whole towards the most deprived members is not simple, nor is it devoid of ambivalence.

First of all, a kind of defensive reaction is noticeable, since in their poorer neighbours the poor see what might happen to them if their own situation worsens. And they want to protect themselves against that. Hence there is a tendency to set the poorest apart. For example, we have found parents preventing their children from associating with a family whose children took drugs. What they wished to do was to protect their children against this type of behaviour, which they knew to be dangerous, while also knowing perfectly well that young people living in such conditions are driven to take drugs. When a project is drawn up and holds out the promise of improvements that are absolutely necessary, the most active among the poor people want to do their utmost to obtain them, and are not immediately willing to move at the pace of the poorest, which might slow down or even threaten the project. We said, in the preceding chapter, that the most deprived people behaved in a way that seemed disordered in the eyes of society. It should be pointed out that such behaviour may also appear disordered to their neighbours, and this too helps to cause a breach between them and the poorest of all.

However, the group is also capable of showing solidarity towards its poorest members. Daily life frequently brings such gestures of solidarity, the most obvious being those that occur at the most dramatic moments: someone's death, a dwelling swept away by a landslide, or when a family that has lost everything and is welcomed into another family's home.

If action depends solely on the most dynamic of the group, it will thrust the poorest to the sidelines. Yet if they are the only people considered, they are in danger of being set apart if they receive assistance. The poorest of all need to recognize their place within their own world, which in turn needs to be able to depend on the most deprived members. Any action taken must therefore benefit the group as a whole, while making sure that the very poorest take an active part.

assume their occupational, family and social obligations and to enjoy their fundamental rights. The resulting lack of confidence may be more or less extensive and may have more or less serious and permanent consequences. It leads to extreme poverty when it affects a number of areas of existence, when it is long-lasting, when it jeopardizes the likelihood of reassuming responsibilities and repossessing rights for the foreseeable future". See Journal officiel de la République française, 28 February 1987, p. 6.

Relations within the family

Even relations inside the family are jeopardized by poverty. This is undoubtedly the worst threat, for the family is the last place where, for the poorest of all, human relations are still possible. When they have lost that, they have lost everything. I would like to illustrate this by describing the plight of children forced to live on the street. In its 1993 report, UNDP told us that the situation of such children is “one of the most obvious symptoms of urban poverty” and that “these children often do have a home and parents”.⁹

What exactly is happening? I will give the example of two children whom I knew in Central America; at the time, they were aged 12 and 14. When I met them they were working on a public refuse dump: all day long, they searched untiringly among the refuse for something that they could sell. Like many children living in this way, they drugged themselves by sniffing glue. I got to know these children very well. But where did they go in the evenings? One day I met one of them in a small shanty town beside the dump. After hesitating a moment, he took me to a little shack, in fact a miserable shelter. That is where he lived. He introduced me to a woman whom I had met elsewhere, and said, “This is my mother”. That is how I was able to make the link between these children met on the dump and this woman, their mother, who, as I had observed earlier, lived in the most abject poverty. From that time on, our relations with the family grew closer. We noticed the extent to which poverty weakens family ties and may go as far as to destroy the family. Starting by working outside, a necessity for the family’s survival, the children end up living independently in the street. Incidentally, we were able to follow this mother’s fight to save something of the family ties. This was demonstrated by the fact that every evening the children were able to find a welcoming home with her. The children, too, did their utmost to maintain these ties.

In some cases the ties weaken so much that they break down completely. However, this happens only at the end of a process against which families struggle as best they can. The immediate consequence of this, as I see it, is that we can do nothing for and with children unless we rely on their families. What is true for children is true also for any other member of the community. Thus we regard it as vital to link the rights of the individual with the rights of the family and, more widely, with those of their community.

If poverty weakens the ties normally established by an individual with those among whom he or she lives, any work devoted to the poorest must

⁹ UNDP, Report on human development (1993), p. ??

aim to strengthen these ties. This cannot be done except by supporting the efforts made by the individuals themselves — and we have already shown the extent to which they do so.

This being so, the first step of all is to get to know them. With the poorest of the poor the only way is to build a gradual relationship of trust. Such knowledge is not acquired through surveys or statistical studies, but through daily commitment over a long period. It is in this sense that Father Joseph Wresinski explained that all he had done with the poorest people within the ATD Quart Monde movement “*arose out of our shared life, never out of a theory*”.¹⁰ A shared life at once re-establishes the ties that have been broken by poverty.

We have mentioned the link between extreme poverty and the enjoyment of rights and the exercise of responsibilities. It is only to the extent that the poorest are able to recover the enjoyment of their rights and the exercise of their responsibilities that they will be able to feel that they are full members of society and thus take part in social life. That is the purpose of our commitment with them. However, the poorest of the poor, deprived of education and often excluded for several generations, do not have the resources to take part in society. Yet their experience of life and of suffering is essential to the whole human race. In the search for a peaceful world, a more amicable world, their unparalleled and unique experience should be turned to account. But they have no way of expressing it: poverty encloses the poorest of all like a wall shutting them off from the outside, even making it impossible for them to let their minds explore new ideas.

In the boxed text at the end of this article, we describe a project carried out in a rural area of Central America and based on the “sharing of knowledge”. This kind of project has been tried out in very different contexts, in industrialized as well as in developing countries. Naturally, the methods must be adapted to each context, but the common basis is that sharing of knowledge which makes it possible to break out of the confinement created by poverty. It is the prerequisite for partnership with the poorest of the poor.

Régis De Muylder was born in 1956. He is Belgian, married, with four children, and is a physician. In 1982 he joined the voluntary workers of the ATD Quart Monde movement, together with his wife. In Guatemala, where he went in 1983, he first took part in a “Savoir-Santé” project in a rural area, then in others in very poor districts of the capital. Since September 1993 he has been working in the movement’s international centre at Pierrelaye, France.

¹⁰ J. Wresinski, *Les Pauvres sont l’Eglise*, p. 152.

**FROM SHARING KNOWLEDGE TO PARTNERSHIP:
THE EXAMPLE OF THE "SAVOIR-SANTÉ"
(KNOWLEDGE-HEALTH) PROJECT**

The "library of the fields" (called "library of the streets" in urban areas) is a library that goes where the families live, in the heart of the village or the district. It provides an activity that brings contact with the people: everyone is invited to join in. Those in charge of the library may visit families, so as to get to know them and build up relations of trust with them. The project also makes it possible to have effective links with the poorest of all.

The library always functions on the basis of books, but not with the aim of making people literate. The books, which are chosen for their illustrations and for the subjects they deal with, play a vital role in stimulating an opening to the world, helping to discover the environment, encouraging discussion among the various users of the library. It also serves as a base for other activities encouraging self-expression (drawing, painting, various workshops). Knowledge is not only a window on the universe, but is also essential for creating a favourable personal image, for it is all too true that the poorest people are judged according to their unfavourable conditions (illiteracy, mortality, isolation, and so on).

Once reciprocal trust and knowledge have been created, other projects can be planned. The idea is not to propose projects for the community that have been devised outside it, but to meet the poorest people in the context of projects that they nurture within them but are unable to express initially, precisely because of their extreme poverty.

This was how we worked in connection with child malnutrition. Contact with the part of the population most closely concerned by this situation showed us that it was not possible to get sustained action on malnutrition - which was a pernicious and painful reality - by suggesting an answer in the form of food aid. On the other hand, it **was** possible to get action in relation to an issue that the people regarded as important, namely, the development of the young child. The fight against malnutrition must first of all take into account the family unit, and only subsequently take action on the nutritional and medical levels. It was with the poorest families that we devised and implemented the project "*Savoir-Santé*", which represents a global approach responding to realities as experienced by the most deprived families.