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CHANGING THE WORLD STARTING FROM THE POOR

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Friends of the poor: your theme is very dear to our Community and we thank you for offering us the opportunity of participating in this reflection. It is a theme on which we continually confront ourselves most willingly, such as the meeting in Naples, held last June, in which we reflected together with many organizations that work alongside new and old poverties.

“Changing the world starting from the poor”: this is the dream that the community of Saint Egidio shares with many other people, a dream that even today is proposed to us in this session of your Congress.

The analysis, that I would like to share with you, begins from the experience of the Community of Saint Egidio and it will be a sociological one not only in the analysis of who the poor are, today, but in a particular way for the research of what kind of society, better what kind of mentality the poor have of themselves, today, and what answers we can find in order to help them as friends.

Being close to the poor is harder and harder; **our hope** is put to the test because their condition is deteriorating: the demolition of the social system, the economic crisis which becomes graver (and burdens them in particular). The poor increase and this reality is always less interesting; we even get even used to suffering. It is this that makes us suffer more: **there is a crisis** of culture and practice of solidarity that seems out of fashion. This crisis is only an aspect of **a society** which no longer sees its future, of **a western world** which no longer has any vision. Crushed by globalization and new geopolitical scenarios, we are afraid because our world is going to disappear and because we see the decline of a world where Europe had a sure horizon.

This uncertainty is felt by all, there is no defence against this new direction of global history which influences culture, finance and future. In this frightening situation the poor become less interesting, on the contrary, they become disturbing phantoms of what all of us risk to become. Today, the great question is not the defence *of the poor* but the defence *from the poor*: the **homeless** trouble our streets, **gypsies** spark off campaigns far greater than their small number; **beggars** challenge our sense of dignity and the **ordinances**, that forbid alms, are multiplying, the **elderly** themselves are “**disturbing**”, because they remind us in our flesh our own weakness and our destiny of physical decline, and so they are isolated.

Even the condition of **sick people** does not provoke anymore, in public opinion, a sense of compassion and defence of life and people appeal to personal freedom in choosing his/her way of dying so as to protect himself/herself from the idea (and image) of suffering. Contempt and harshness are proclaimed in order to defend our peace and wellbeing, and to remove threats of a dark future by keeping the poor at a distance from our horizons, our homes, our lives, while looking for a model of someone who is victorious, strong, a TV hero who does not exist in reality.

In such a weak society, without any cultural models, the proclamation of hatred and contempt is extremely dangerous and can only generate violence.

In this scenario, we must ask ourselves again: **why should we defend the poor and dedicate our lives to them? Why do we choose to be “friends of the poor”?**

We believe that the answer must become stronger, it cannot be only a private answer of a few (or many) people of good will, but it must be a cultural model for the whole of society. **We must find again the reasons for proclaiming the human beauty of friendship with the poor so as to be able to put them again at the centre of society.**

In the last fifty years, this has been the experience of the Community of Saint Egidio, the experience of Christian people who, in meeting and being close to the poor whom they meet on their way, discover the very roots of the evangelical experience. The first students who, in 1968, began to gather together around the Word of God, understood how the Gospel could not be lived far away from the poor: **the poor are our friends and the Gospel is the Good News for the poor**. The first form of service of the Community, when it was not yet called Saint Egidio, started with after school help for marginalized children of the depressed areas of Rome.

Gradually this friendship embraced other categories of poor people:

- **physically and mentally disabled people, homeless people, foreign immigrants, terminally ill patients**
- **and in different situations: prisons, homes for elderly people, nomadic camps, refugee camps.**

During these years, a sensitivity has developed for every kind of poverty, old, new or emerging, as well as towards non traditional poverties, like that present in many European Countries of lonely, elderly people, even if they are well-to-do people. We will have the chance to tell you.

Today we feel there is a new challenge to be faced. We believe that friendship with the poor must not be considered a private matter just for a few people: we must re-propose solidarity as the flavour of humanity in many parts of Italy. We feel that a society without solidarity becomes dehumanized and corrupted, because the economic logic that the actual crisis forces on us, is wearing away a sense of gratuity. The world of solidarity, of Voluntary Service, that in the 1970's was characterised by impassioned movements, today it is just a personal tendency, it is only a “hobby” in the best of cases, and even, at times, a remunerated commitment.

Today, we believe that it is important to rediscover the humanistic and spiritual foundation of friendship with the poor. We feel that our response must not be only of a sociological character, but spiritual and even “anthropological”, so as to find a more vital, attractive and evangelical way of talking of the poor.

The poor cannot be marginalized in Christian life: friendship with the poor is the vital heart of Christianity. “The Church presents itself as it would like to be: the Church of everyone and in particular of the poor”: thus John XXIII opened the great Vatican Council II.

Pope Benedict XVI in a book for young people, “Christian fraternity”, wrote: “Neighbour is above all the poor person I meet, because he is simply a brother of the Master, more and more

present in little ones.”

Meeting with the poor is not only a social reality, but a spiritual and mystical one, because in it concrete sorrow and spiritual depth intertwine. Fr. Congar, a great theologian of the Council, wrote: **“The poor are a reality of the Church ... a Christian community cannot exist without diakonia and without Eucharist.”** The Orthodox theologian, Olivier Clement, affirmed that a further sacrament exists, **“the sacrament of the poor.”** There is a spiritual dimension in this being closer to the poor that provokes the Church to be closer to Christ himself. It would be necessary, therefore, to take on a new audacity of bringing the poor into the heart of Christian experience.

And yet we feel even a “lay” valence in friendship with the poor: the poor have a humanity to be discovered; it is necessary to find a way, a language in order to say this. There is need of friendship and humanity and we feel that for those who suffer there is a real and great need to have a voice... there are many people who are never called by name, who do not speak with anyone.

We become sick because of lack of social bonds, friendship, recognition of one’s own social importance. Friendship with the poor restores a name, a face to many people and responds to the expression of contempt. It responds even to our need of human and social relationships and then in this new covenant we become like family members: he who serves and he who is served cannot be distinguished anymore. Today, there is a lack of vision, we are resigned: John Paul II said: “Man is suffering because of a lack of vision, but if this is true the signs of the times must become more prominent..”

Well, there is an explosive sign of the times that allows a vision to be real: the poor increase, the weak feel more lonely and suffer more. Too many people suffer. Seeing the poor provokes a vision for the future. John Crisostomo said this: “If you eliminate the poor, you eliminate a great hope of salvation.” It is like this: to eliminate the poor provokes corruption, the end of gratuity and it does not give security, on the contrary it takes away hope.

A great humanistic movement will spring up from the poor. There is a human and divine beauty in the poor. A new humanism springs up from the friendship with the poor. Those who keep this bond with them will not lose their sense of humanity.

It is a journey of happiness: “There is more joy in giving than in receiving”, St. Paul reminds us. Thus we are not prisoners of sadness, on the contrary, we discover here a spring of great fullness.

Therefore it is necessary, as Christians, but I would say more so, as men and women, to recover hope in the face of resignation in order to find a new humanism that recognizes, in the essence of humanity, not omnipotence but weakness, not autonomy but interdependence. We cannot be fully human alone, we discover our identity only if we need the other person, so that starting again from the weakness of those who suffer is to find ourselves, our true self.

Only then will we feel the urgency of giving a response to the weak and to their questions: we must say yes, first of all, though through many difficulties that we do not want to deny, because we are forced to love by the poor.

What is the purpose of being their friends?

Could we be incisive through our friendship?

In the face of these essential questions are we not condemned to be insignificant?

“He who saves a man saves the whole world” says the Talmud, and the Koran re-echoes: “He who has helped a person, has helped the whole of humanity”. The world changes when a person commits self to the other person, even one life is worth a struggle. Sorrow for the success of evil is already the beginning of hope, the beginning of a choice.

**Friendship with the poor is a daily choice.
It is a personal choice.**

We must start from ourselves as persons and from the poor whom I meet as a person.

To say yes is the beginning of the defeat of powerlessness; it is necessary to start, meet, take the other by the hand, to be faithful to a vital question, a thought, and the responses will come. It is love that makes us intelligent, it is love and fidelity that give us passion for the life of those who suffer, for the situations which seem to have no way out, for the paths of reconciliation.

Friends of the poor: it is a lot. Simple and important stories of solidarity with these little ones show that our challenge is not to become efficient in difficult situations but give more voice to our hope for change and to the poor, the voice of redemption and healing. Everyone is a witness of hope if he/she remembers his/her essence as a person and the humanity that I find in the poor whom I meet and who show me the humanity of those far away.