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**“I recommend to you my beloved poor ...
with simplicity, with devotion, with respect”**

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Expressions of two centuries ago do not always keep their freshness and relevance in the present. The expression used in the title of your gathering is perhaps half between past and present: on the one hand it is certainly important, on the other perhaps it is a little risky in as much as today, more than in the 19th century, charity takes on the characteristic of justice. Thus, for these reasons I would like to link it with another expression, well known, that comes from another context but always from the words of Magdalene. As you certainly know, the second phrase refers to the breaking of Bread which is God's word. It seems appropriate to use it here for many reasons.

1 Firstly, because it “translates”, in a particular way, what has been assigned to me with the proposed title, which indicates the passage of Mt 25:31-46, with those words “you have done it to me”. It shows the theological importance, to be fulfilled on one's knees, with “devotion” in one's relationship with every “little one among our brothers and sisters.”

2 Further, since everything takes on, in the combination of the words “poor/word/bread”, a eucharistic trait: this does not refer neither solely nor primarily to the “rite” but to the existential dimension about which we spoke of above.

3 Last, but not least, regarding the term *respect* which seems so insignificant compared with the important topics of Christian ethics and with the overwhelming ideals, around which, always more and more I convince myself, our relationships are forged and even more if these relationships deal with “help” that is offered to the poor. Help that is not characterised, as the first and essential element, by respect for the other person may become auto-gratification or even more, oppression.

Keeping in mind what we have said, the evangelical viewpoint on which we would like to reflect today is essential to avoid that our relation with the poor may not make us “good Christians” at a cheap price. I suggest dealing with the topic by using some related passages to the *sacrament* of a Presence [God no one has ever seen, the Only Begotten Son revealed Him to us, Jn 1:18] that promises/invokes protection and guarantees a blessing.

The stranger and protection-blessing

³ I heard a loud voice call from the throne, “You see this city? Here God lives among men. He will make His home among them; they shall be His people and He will be their God.” (Rev 21:3)

The Son, only/beloved, Jesus of Nazareth crucified and risen, is a Presence and narration of God in human language. We are reminded of this through the pericope of the “disciples of Emmaus”(Lk 24,15-18).

24 ¹⁵ Now as they talked this over, Jesus himself came up and walked by their side; ¹⁶ but something prevented them from recognising him. ¹⁷ He said to them: “What matters are you discussing as you walk along?” They stopped short, their faces down cast. Then one of them, called Cleopas, answered him: “You must be the only person staying in Jerusalem who does not know the things that have been happening there these last few days?”

His presence which was not recognised immediately needed signs which, eloquent in an ecclesial context, are certainly the Word and broken bread. But before these signs, the one that triggers off the itinerary of recognising Him, is the road travelled together with this *paroikos*, a stranger: in the situations of God’s presence in Mt 25 this is probably the most *difficult thing* to do in our opulent West, while in other contexts the greatest difficulty of obtaining food and water imposes different settings.

Talking from my point of view, I would like to dwell, in particular, on this situation. In the light of the passage quoted, it is *obvious* that the presence of Christ is in the stranger, the prisoner and in each one of us. This obviousness risks remaining such only on a theoretical plane: each one of us “knows” how much the spiritual, existential and political importance of this text is not to be taken for granted; it is not to be seen by evidence and in power, it is rather seen as a manifestation of the wind of the Spirit, whispering voice of silence (1 Kings 17) and it manifests itself in the powerful call to conversion. A possible icon could be the women and men in the boats of desperation, those who died in the sea while trying to reach the promise of a better life, a personal and even family exodus. We know well the passage of Exodus: God listens to the cries of his people and he walks with them. In the Gospel text he identifies himself with them, not with Pharaoh and his chariots and horsemen. Some time ago an interesting book of Ettore Masina was published “on-line” that has something very efficacious to say:

«Whoever reads history books not only written by winners but also by listening to the cries and silence of the poor to whom the mass media of the powerful cut their vocal cords; those who investigate the facts of the past and those of the present and of which—whether we like it or not— we are responsible, protagonists and agents; those who do not forget the Gospel neither the hard, long and suffered experience of building a society in which man is brother to man and not a wolf, knows well that events happen which appear of little significance but instead, if one reflects, indicate the level of evil of which we are all responsible unless we actively preoccupy ourselves with those who suffer a cruel denial of his basic rights. These events are not visible and do not make a noise like devastating wars or murders of tyrants, or bloody revolutions; they do not force parliaments to meet urgently nor do they have an effect on the stock market, they do not bring change to school programmes nor dissolve our concentration on “our own affairs”. Since it seems only to concern certain groups of poor people, we give them little and ephemeral attention. (...)

Those events, however, are a transparent indication of a possible explosion that reveals the flaws in our system of life, both personal and collective. To think they are insignificant phenomena is an illusion of the powerful and, perhaps, even ours, of us, restless and quivering good men and women who turn their backs since “nothing can be done anyway” (...)

What happened in the last few days in that watery cemetery in which a genocide of wretched people were buried and plead for mercy, is the sign, according to me, of an anthropological change of terrible dimensions: it is the regression of ancient and cruel times that the history of civilization had made us think that such tragedies could not happen again. “In 1847, 84 merchant ships were stopped at Grosse Isle, close to Quebec. Of the Irish immigrants who were seeking refuge beneath makeshift roofs, exposed to all weathers, about 10,000 died. And 3.000 others were abandoned by everyone so that their names were never known. As the Bible says, *I saw them strewn on the shore, I saw them drag themselves through mud and die like fish out of water.*”»

Therefore, in what way must we “remember the poor”? How must we approach them? with devotion, simplicity, respect ... which could be expressed by the word “justice”, protection, gratuity/ respect.

1 - Justice, which means also trying to understand the causes. The Synod held a few years ago in this Diocese thus expressed itself.

We note the urgency to set out a plan within which to indicate particular situations, by means of a political and structural analysis of the causes and the need of commitment over a period of time for justice and peace, in the light of the Gospel, which forces us to look for a lifestyle that are sober and honest. One’s personal awareness of the *suffering* and *marginalization* and active solidarity which this arouses, compels us, at the same time, to discover the economic, social and political causes of “hardship”, avoiding generic evaluations about the “poor”. It is important to remember the model of economic development in which we are inserted and the inter-connections of such a model at the world level, which show the inseparable bonds among the making of arms, exploitation of resources, the question of the environment and the impoverishment of two thirds of humanity. It is obvious that aid, which does not make us reflect on the causes which provoke marginalization or injustice, would be partial and inadequate though it is necessary as a “short-term solution”. Also we point out the contradiction between willingness to make offerings or support charitable initiatives of every kind and the consolidation of a discriminating and exclusive culture. [Diocese of Verona, *Libro Sinodale* - 2003]

2 - Care or protection underline even the practical aspect of this relationship. *Care* is the verb par excellence of the covenant, which is to be defended (as, for example, in Psalm 103:18), as is so often repeated in the Book of Deuteronomy [e.g. Dt 5:1; the whole of chapter 6, from which the use of “phylacteries”, of *phyllasso*, protect (cfr Mt 23:5)]. On the same level, the garden of “Eden”, situated in the East, is to be cared for [and God took the man and settled him in the garden of Eden to cultivate and take care of it (*shmr*) Gen 2:15)], because it is the price of the agreement. A fraternal bond, too, is seen as “protection”: «am I my brother’s guardian (*shomar*)?» asks Cain (Gen 4:9). But this is really possible because the guardian, who can only be God, as the psalm says, describes His blessing as care and protection:

I lift my eyes to the mountains: where is help to come from?/Help comes to me from God, who made heaven and earth. No letting our footsteps slip!/This **guard** (*shomer*) of yours, he does not doze! The **guardian** of Israel does not doze or sleep.

God **guards** you, shades you./With God at your right hand the sun cannot strike you down by day, nor moon at night,/God **guards** you from harm,/He **guards** your lives. (Psalm 121)

Protection, therefore, can be experienced and received, and for this reason it can be taken on: even as fraternal guardianship. Refusing to be a guardian is to refuse the identity of a brother (or sister), it means going against creation because *adamà* (the earth) has again had to drink up *damim* (blood) of Abel, “thrown”, wasted, “drowned” in the ships ...

Protection, therefore, is a duty: of care and acceptance. And also the task of witnessing to the “centre”, a possibility of being fully humanized. Strangely enough, even the word which we usually translate with “watchman” is a word made up of the same letters, practically it means “guardian”:

«Someone shouts to me from Seir,
Watchman, (*shomer*, guardian) what time of night?
Watchman (guardian) what time of night?
The watchman (guardian) answers, Morning is coming... » (Is 21:11-12)

3 - With respect and simplicity. The practical and functional form of caring/protection needs, as mentioned above, deep respect. But there is a vision even more *simple*, that bestows truth on the whole value and can include both the aspect of respect and that of contemplation/devotion. It is the vision of simply being there, completely and even beyond one’s possibility of action, even if useful, in order to reach the deep truth. This truth is anthropological as well as theological, in the Christian sense of the word, and underlines the preciousness of every life, going beyond roles and actions. The following affirmations come from particular contexts because they refer to consecrated life and, yet in their simplicity, they can be of value to everyone.

“Consecrated people, women and men, fragile and in love, compassionate and realists, must nourish — by recounting and living — nothing but parables of wounded existence healed by grace, witnesses of painful anxieties which dialogue brings to authenticity, provoking reactions that draw theoretical curiosity to transform itself into compassionate practice, gestures of casual meetings that compassion enwraps with new hope.” (B. Secondin - D. Papa)

«The prospect of the service of charity gives us the chance to address ourselves to religious people called, by their choice of life which makes them “poor and put aside”, to be signs of hope, witnessing the possibility given to every man and woman to break through the frontiers of society and of life by finding a meaning, a reason for which it is possible to live and give life.»
(CEI, *Comunicare il vangelo in un mondo che cambia* n. 62).

Thus “to remember” means to become a voice for every creature, to gather up the fragments “so that nothing may be lost” - perhaps in the desert ... in the end, it is the opportunity to find one’s own identity in being simply a *blessing*, before and beyond any activity undertaken.

God was in this place and I did not know it

“Rabbi, where do you live?” “Come and see...” (Jn 1:38-39)

Having brought to mind all this, I believe that the invitation we receive, like the first disciples of the IV Gospel, like the two disciples of Emmaus, is to let ourselves be convened, allow the Spirit to make our hearts burn in this listening, and to dwell in his presence. Probably a good spiritual exercise — while we look for concrete and practical ways in our commitment and our duty of justice, as citizens and as Christians, in a difficult time — could be that of “taking off our sandals” before people who are for us an icon of the Master who has nowhere to lay his head, asking them for forgiveness and acceptance. Awaiting the theophany in which His presence appears suddenly, like Jacob of old, we can say “God was in this place and I did not know it ... this is the house of God and the gate of heaven.” (Gn 28:17)