

Happy are the poor! A challenge for today

"Blessed are the poor in spirit, for the kingdom of heaven is theirs." Mt 5, 3.

We wanted to take this as the theme for this year and to take Bernadette as a witness to this blessing.

A superior asked her one day if she had not experienced some feelings of complacency in seeing the favours that the Blessed Virgin had bestowed upon her. *"What do you think of me? Do not I know that if the Blessed Virgin chose me because I was the most ignorant? If she had found one more ignorant than me, she would have taken chosen them"* (Mother Marie-Thérèse Bordenave).

In the introduction I must confess that I am poorly qualified to talk about poverty because I lack nothing and have never wanted for anything.

I would also like to avoid a speech which makes people feel guilty. In the Church we have fallen into this trap: to make those who suffer no material difficulties feel guilty as if they were thus incapable of experiencing poverty in any form; and, on the contrary, to exalt those who were in real poverty, perhaps suffering, by suggesting that all virtue was contained in this suffering: to become a saint or at least an example to follow, all you had to do was to be poor. I really would like to avoid this when I talk about poverty in Lourdes this year!

I had a very good lesson from Sister Emmanuelle who worked in Cairo's ragpickers district: "The poor," she told me one day privately, as a challenge, "are also liars, thieves and murderers. "

What did she mean? firstly that the poor did not choose to be so. And they were trying hard to get out of poverty by any means, including sometimes by objectively immoral means.

The second thing she said, implicitly is that, following Jesus, she had accepted the mission of living among these poor people, and of taking risks:

- She accepted the risk of being robbed of even the little that she had.
- While she was trying to be truthful with them, she took the risk of being lied to, cheated.
- When she finally decided to live with them, when she literally gave her life for them, she agreed to take the risk that someone might take her life on a street corner for a few dollars, out of jealousy, under the hold of alcohol or to get drugs.

In fact, I think what she was saying was that she had agreed to let herself be robbed. This is her experience of poverty. It was not so much admiring the poor, cultivating a kind of ideal of poverty that she could have thrown in the face of those who lived in rich countries. She accepted that the little she had might be taken from her, and that included the money she received, the trust she had earned, the minimum she needed for herself, her own life. Nothing was certain. She was ready to give up what she legitimately had. This was her true experience of poverty.

Sr. Emmanuelle's poverty was to let herself be divested of what she could have held on to and that she could legitimately have kept. She let herself be stripped bare. This was her path of

poverty. This was the life she had chosen, the form of poverty she had chosen; but the most radical poverty was to accept that people could take from her what she still had.

We are talking about two forms of poverty which converge but are not exactly comparable:

- The poverty of those who have not chosen it and want to get by at any price.
- The chosen, radical poverty of those who follow Jesus and who accept to be impoverished without being really in control. And who do this so that they can join those who live in an unjust, degrading poverty, unworthy of the human condition. Basically, to reach the poor, we have to accept what is the very bottom line of poverty: to have no hold on what is happening, on the material conditions in which we live, to accept that nothing we have is permanent.

The fight of Sr. Emmanuelle was about trying to give these scavengers better living conditions and to help them in their suffering. In this sense it was a social struggle.

But there was also another struggle against poverty, a deeper, more intimate, more spiritual and more mystical struggle: it was to accept a form of poverty imposed by circumstances: an impoverishment that she had not reckoned on, that she had not deserved, that she had not planned and into which she agreed to enter.

In this sense, she also confessed that the poor, whom she visited in this part of Cairo, had also taught her this path of interior divesting. The path of those who push on without knowing what the next day will bring because they must live in the present; the path also of a deep solidarity between communities, families, finding food work, helping each other, giving and receiving just for the hope of survival.

The poverty of Jesus

How can one truly say "blessed are the poor in spirit" without making an apology for poverty as if it had value in itself; without offending those who have nothing and who want only one thing: to get out of their miserable condition?

I believe this blessing obviously applies to Jesus first. He was the first poor man.

At the time of the anointing in Bethany, before the Passion, Mary is reproached for having poured a perfume of great price on Jesus when it could have been sold and the money given to the poor. Jesus answers: "The poor, you will always have them with you; but you will not always have me." (John 12, 8). It is as if, before reaching out to the poor, we first have to take the time to contemplate Jesus, to be with him, to show him our love, to be loved by him, to kneel before him and ask him for the grace of poverty in spirit.

In the Trinity, the Father is the source of all divinity. But all that he has, all that he is, he gives to the Son without keeping anything for himself. That is why the Son is God: because he has received everything from the Father, because the Father has given him everything. We say in the Creed that the Son is begotten of the Father. He is God equal to the Father. The Son receives everything from the Father: this is also why we can use these images of human paternity and connection.

These images say something of this intra-divine reality: the Father gives everything, the Son receives everything. But in eternal thanksgiving, the Son surrenders himself entirely to the Father in the love that is the Holy Spirit. The Son retains nothing for himself: as echoes of the

gift that the Father has made of himself, he gives himself to the Father in a burst of love and joy. The fruitfulness of this love of the Father and the Son is a divine Person: the Holy Spirit who is witness to this mutual and eternal gift.

In other words, the joy of the Son is in receiving from the Father. He does not pretend to be self-sufficient, to depend on himself. All his joy is in welcoming what the Father gives him, then surrendering to the Father in thanks for this gift received from him. The Son retains nothing as if he wanted to jealously guard his being the SON. This is what we might call a form of intra-Trinitarian poverty, a poverty that is in the very experience of Trinitarian life. Where there is only self-giving, welcome and surrender. And not taking possession, grabbing, seizing, a pretence of having everything.

The Son lives in the dependence of the Father and, in his earthly life, it is the source of his joy and praise. *"All things have been given to me by my Father,"* cries Jesus, when he is full of the joy of the Holy Spirit (Luke 10:22). But it is not so that he may own his gifts. For he presents himself precisely as he was sent by the Father. The mission of Jesus is not a mission he has given himself. He understands he is the Envoy of the Father (Jn 5: 19-20.23.24.30.36-38.43), that is to say the one who does his will, who receives from him his mission to reconcile the world with the Father.

In the desert, the Tempter offers him the chance to claim his mission for himself for his own comfort (eating bread because he is hungry), for his glory (to jump from the pinnacle of the temple and come out unscathed), for his power (to possess all the kingdoms of the earth).

But: Jesus is poor, radically poor. He has no place to rest his head (Mt 8:20) he in whom all creation was made. For he lives only in the dependence of his Father. *"My food,"* he says in the story of the Samaritan, *"is to do the will of the one who sent me and bring his work to a successful conclusion."* Jn 4:34.

Jesus lives as a poor man. He receives his mission from the Father and receives it in the Holy Spirit, as a beggar. He is not on his own. He comes to bring humanity back to the Father to make it a humanity of adopted sons and daughters, so that this humanity may experience the joy of this blessed dependence of the only-begotten Son.

The prodigal son

Father Jean-Miguel Garrigues (*God without the thought of evil*) points out that the parable of the prodigal son is the best interpretation, the best reading of Genesis chapter 3 on original sin, because the son wants to leave with his share of the inheritance. He was living with his father. How was he living? Like the older brother: he lived with his father but as an employee. Neither understood that *"all that is mine is yours."* The elder son lived in sadness and rancour **without understanding that everything was his**, the younger wanted to seize his due and to separate from his father permanently. The elder did not want to touch any of what was placed at his disposal; the younger wanted to take everything and go away and then spend until his supplies were exhausted.

The Father gave them everything, but neither of them saw it at the time. He had made them heirs of all he possessed. One of them saw nothing and the other wanted to take part of the inheritance for himself. This is our tragedy: to live a Mercenary Christianity although we are sons and daughters. Or to live far from the Father, thinking that we ourselves can be the source.

What made the prodigal son come back was that *"he would have liked to fill the belly with the food that the pigs ate, but no one gave him any."* He realised that to live, one must receive. And that's when he returned to his father.

It is the most fundamental experience that we too can have, to confess that to live we must learn to receive everything from the Father. And learn to receive it often through others. We learn, therefore, that to receive, we must be poor. We are citizens of the Kingdom. The Kingdom of Heaven belongs to us when we follow the way of the Son who receives everything from the Father, who humbly accepts that *"all that is mine is yours."* (Lk 15:31). Not to own it but to receive it every day like food, like manna in the desert.

This is how St Paul can say, *"All things are yours, but you are Christ's, and Christ is God's."* (1 Cor 3: 22-23). And Father Garrigue comments, *"You can only be with the Son by entering into the relationship he has with his Father, a relationship in which nothing is shared by division, where everything is shared in communion."* *God without the thought of evil*, p. 60.

We are heirs of the Kingdom. But not to make it a personal possession. What is given to us is the spirit, as a deposit (2 Cor 5:5), that is to say, the Holy Spirit himself. We cannot own him; we receive him day after day as beggars.

And if we can give thanks every day, it is precisely because we realise that the Holy Spirit has been given to us and, with him, all the gifts from the Father. Only a man poor in spirit can see the grace that is given to him. A rich man, a satisfied man, a satiated man, sees nothing: everything is due to him. A poor man sees with his hands and his heart open. That's why he knows how to say thank you. When we no longer know how to take the time to give thanks, it is because we live as if satisfied with God: everything is due to us, we left with our share of inheritance, we do not know how to receive humbly like the poor.

It is our very identity as sons or daughters of the Father which is in danger. Then ask for the grace to rediscover the meaning of thanksgiving, the "thank you" that reaches out to God. Only the Holy Spirit, the Father of the poor, can awaken that in us, can teach us again to be sons and daughters, to behave as sons and daughters.

The spirit of childhood

Here is why this theme of poverty is associated with the spirit of childhood. *"Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of heaven belongs to such as these."* Mt 19:14.

The child lives in the dependence of his or her parents. But in a confident dependence, living from day to day, living fully in the present moment. Here is our adult problem: we live in the anguish of the future and in the regret of the past and we struggle to live in the grace of the present moment: this meeting, this person who is in front of me, this evening with friends, this sunny day, this gesture of friendship that is given. This is where we can rediscover the joy of receiving everything from God as a child who receives everything from his parents. This is also where we can find meaning in the divine providence that supports us every day. God is

here; but we have trouble being present to ourselves. We are elsewhere, in the future or in the past; while God is here, in the present, in the depths of the present life.

The human heart aspires to recover this spirit of childhood, this poverty of the soul, this spirit of a son or daughter. But the current culture offers us something else: it offers us an ideal of freedom and independence based on consumption.

We are right to fight against all forms of poverty. But we forget to differentiate between autonomy and independence. There is a legitimate autonomy, because we are made to stand up, to make our own choices, to bear our responsibilities. In this sense, to educate is to bring out of childhood, out of the state of the need for permanent assistance. Parents teach their children to make choices, to discern, to take charge, to become responsible for themselves. This is the beautiful freedom that leads to autonomy: your life belongs to you. Stand before men and before God who wants you to live, free to love.

But the autonomy of the one who directs his own life is not an independence. We can live independently but by receiving everything from the Father; and receiving from others what we need to live. Solidarity between men is not an exemption plan. It is the reverse of our human condition. We live in interdependence, receiving from each other; welcoming riches that we do not have but which have been given to others; then giving what we have to enrich those around us with our gifts. Our social life is an exchange of gifts.

That is why it is so important to teach young people to understand what they carry in themselves in terms of wealth, talents, know-how, inner momentum, great desires ... so that they make the most of all that is in them so that they can make it available to all.

For that, we need a true spirit of poverty and responsibility. Poverty to recognise that we do not have everything inside ourselves, that we must receive and depend on others. Responsibility to recognise what has been given to us so we can offer it, share it and make it a gift that is at the service of all.

You know how Bernadette discovered her vocation to enter the community of Nevers sisters? Answering the call of one of the sisters who asked her to look after an old man at the hospice where Bernadette was studying. Other communities had tried to lure her into joining them. But with very outward-looking arguments. The sisters of Nevers did not ask her to join them: they asked her to look after a poor man. And from there, Bernadette knew what she wanted to do with her life.

It seems to me that we find our vocation, the face of God, by taking care of others. And it is here, in peace and in the joy of service, that we learn who we are in the sight of God.

Alongside the material poverty of social misery, people who cannot make ends meet, alongside people who live on the street, alongside the weakness of physical disability, alongside all these forms of vulnerability we think of when we talk about poverty, there are also hidden poverties; these poverties that are less conspicuous, but which are however so much part of today's world.

I think of the poverty generated by the mental handicap, mental illness that is sometimes more difficult to detect and accept. And I salute the Aygues-Vives Home and the Roof of Hope that are here in Lourdes in the service of people with bipolar disorders.

Today, with the movement of the 'gilet jaunes' (the yellow-jackets), the poverty felt through the loss of social position has been highlighted, the feeling of being abandoned by the state, by the different institutions. This demotion results in isolation, lack of culture and opportunity to express oneself, the rise of non-contract jobs (I am thinking of seasonal workers who have to move from one region to another without having a real home). It is also a feeling of uselessness when one has not had work for a long time, feeling embarrassed and sometimes even an encumbrance. That drives some to think that assisted suicide at the end of life is still the best solution so that we are no longer a burden.

Among the new forms of poverty, there is, conversely, for those who have work, the pressure of performance, efficiency, profitability, objectives. The obligation always to be efficient, to be up to the task; the spirit of competition, a competition that undermines professional relationships. There are different forms of harassment. Then feeling down or even depression. These are also a form of poverty.

There is also the poverty engendered by the disintegration of the family presented as a freedom, but which ultimately isolates the individual. These are the mothers who raise their children alone, children educated without a father and who have not received the rules of integration into life in society; it is children in emotional imbalance because of the separation of their parents and the redefining of marriage. All this can lead to emptiness, addiction to drugs, alcohol, sex. It is the disappointment in oneself due to the difficulty or the impossibility of keeping commitments made, of being faithful to promises. The feeling of abandonment, extreme loneliness. The precariousness of romantic relationships to which we commit ourselves emotionally but which are ultimately disappointing.

Poverty is also the extreme difficulty that foreigners face in integrating with a new society and the formation of communities living by themselves. The difficulty for these foreigners in finding work, in building relationships, in feeling welcomed. It is also the precariousness of having to take odd jobs, sometimes prostitution.

There is the poverty generated by new technologies: incarceration in front of screens, addiction to online games, pornography, the danger of predators of all kinds.

Poverty is also spiritual misery, secularisation, the absence of God; that is, the absence of a transcendent perspective, being ignorant of the goodness of God's love for us. It is, I believe, the most radical poverty. Because this poverty has no future and no hope.

I would also like to mention what causes spiritual misery: the temptation to turn to the esoteric, occultism, and especially black and white magic, and astrology. There is also the joining of sects.

The Church, strong in her relationship with the Lord, has always dared to look at these forms of poverty and the people who were victims of them. She has always been able to discern the needs, the existential emptiness, the wounds of the heart, the relationship difficulties, in short, the poverties of an era. She always knew how to face in truth what the women and men of her time were lacking: care in the face of sickness, instruction in the face of ignorance, the preaching of the truth in the face of idol worship, the defence of workers, the liberation of slaves, the preservation of marriage and the family, the education of children and young people.

When we purify our gaze in the eyes of the Lord, we can see all these forms of poverty, the cry of the heart of man, his thirst and hunger, the wounds of his soul. And this is a call-to-arms for us. To stop there and look. All the testimonies we are going to hear today will tell us this. So, like Bernadette, we have found the form our commitment should take. May this year commit us to it!