

EDUCATIONAL SERVICE OF THE VERY POOR

"Let us not be content to stay where we are, but rather let us go on our way directed by the Holy Spirit, with the aid of our Brothers and the guarantee of the Church" (Circular 412, p. 119).

"Every man carries in himself a fundamental, inalienable value, his dignity as a man". (Movement ATD Fourth World)

For five years I have been working with young people and adults in a "Fourth World" setting in Rheims. I am part of an educational organization known as The Movement to Aid the Very Distressed in the Fourth World (Le Mouvement Aide Toute Détresse Quart Monde). I began this work and continue to do it with the encouragement of the District Council. For two years three Brothers worked with me, one full time and two part time.

In this article I wish to say something about the people for whom the ATD exists and about my own work with these people of the "Fourth World".

FOR WHOM ARE WE CONCERNED?

In every society there are millions of poor workers living at the lowest rung of the social ladder. From one generation to the next they pass on a heritage of ignorance, indigence and violence. Excluded from decent housing, basic education, instruction in the professions, and lacking a national union, they are at the arbitrary mercy of the administration and dependent on the welfare agencies. They form a sub-population which in 1960 was given the name the "fourth World". Although the extent of this sub-population is unknown, it is estimated that approximately ten million people in Western Europe alone are part of this culture, with about two million of them in France. The fourth world population of France is family population estimated at three hundred fifty thousand. The majority of these families are French in origin and have a history of nomadic existence; there are also refugee families who over several generations in France have joined the sub-population.

Sent to the galleys by Louis XIV and relegated by Karl Marx to a rank of "population in rags" this sub-population continues today to experience the sub-human conditions of a life marked by exclusion. The families of the fourth world suffer in every area of life:

Economics: Their income is very low or non-existent; since they have no guarantee of even a minimum wage, they must live by their wits.

Housing: Their housing is always over-crowded and of the poorest quality. Despite the disappearance of large shantytowns their habitations continue to be dirty and dangerous. They are usually located on the periphery of large cities and in the worst environmental conditions — temporary homes built to meet an emergency. The people are to be found more or less hidden and scattered in hovels, huts, tents, cellars, abandoned cars, immobile canal boats and empty factory buildings. The minority of these families who may succeed in getting public housing are rarely able to remain there.

Health: Their health is the worst in the nation. They suffer from tuberculosis, alcoholism, pediculosis, stunted growth and other diseases related to the environment. Their life expectancy is the lowest and their infant mortality is the highest; they are a reminder of France in 1850.

Family: They know the humiliation and the mutilation of being deprived of the responsibility of raising their children. Their family and social lives depend in large measure on the public social and educational agencies.

Education: Unable to read or write, the men and women of the fourth world are stuck in a destructive ignorance which undermines all of life, poisons their relationships and often crushes them. In spite of their efforts they have few chances of advancement and are condemned to pass this heritage on to their children. Unable to use existing political power or union and family organizations, they remain ignorant. They are viewed as "Social cases" marginal people condemned to a life of uselessness and mere survival.

THE MOVEMENT TO AID THE VERY POOR OF THE FOURTH WORLD

The Movement ATD was born in 1957 with the aid of a few families and Father Joseph Wresinski. Since its inception it has fought for the respect and the advancement of the people of the fourth world. Its object is to help these families

reintegrate into our collective consciousness and acquire the means of expression which are at the disposal of the majority of citizens. The Movement has three principal goals:

- to see that the recognition of the needs of the most neglected is guaranteed.
- to promote a society which gives absolute priority to the most underprivileged among its members. Misery is not inevitable but is the result of choices made in the areas of economics, politics, science, culture and religion.
- to sensitize our society to the fact that all our efforts to build a world of justice, peace and brotherhood are futile until we attend to the needs of the poorest among us.

The work of the Movement is focused on three areas:

- the family: acquisition of the means necessary to live a decent family life.
- education: to permit access to the gift of knowledge by mobile libraries, learning to read and write and providing job training for the professions.
- participation: assemblies of young people and adults to learn public speaking and the ways of union representation.

A COMMITMENT TO ACTION

The discovery of the fourth world, existing outside our gates, is a progressive discovery. Twenty years of teaching in the Middle East did little to prepare me for this world. Meeting with close friends in a house for young people, showing the same care, the same ideal for justice and facilitating a group of illiterate immigrants for many years helped me to discover among us those most neglected and living in misery. It was also a time for me to answer some questions in my own life. Through reading and sharing the Gospel, various texts of the Founder, the Declaration and the letter of the Superior of May 15, 1978 I came to the conclusion that I had had enough of discussions about poverty and the poor... it was absolutely necessary to do something! But what? When? Where? And With Whom?

The different organizations and projects with which I was familiar did not satisfy me. They appeared to maintain the poor in a form of assistance, or a state of dependence. They did nothing to respect their dignity or to empower them to take matters into their own hands, to live decent and upright lives. A meeting with volunteers of the Movement ATD was followed by my participation in some formative sessions designed to help me understand the plight of the people of the fourth world. My search was ended! I was able to properly celebrate with my Brothers the Tercentenary and to put into practice my vow of educational service to the poor. It was an occasion for me to return concretely to the sources of the Institute.

My efforts with neglected youth were not successful in a day or two. I was able to meet them straight away because of the history and the work already in existence through the Movement ATD in Rheims. In the first place I was content being present to the youth, meeting them where they were, listening to them, sharing with them a part of their experience, permitting them to be and be known such as they were. I had to win them over in some way. All this work demanded much time and patience, a certain "wasting of time". Secondly, the work consisted in bringing them together, helping them to live together, to listen to themselves, to express themselves, to discover and express their needs, to learn ways of changing that would allow them to take charge of their lives. And finally I was able to convince some of the "official" organizations, who were not as yet open to the most neglected, to pay more attention to this area of our society. I worked as a kind of educational facilitator for a group of young people between sixteen and twenty years of age, the majority of them illiterate and from the fourth world. The situations of these fifteen boys and girls were practically identical:

Material poverty: living conditions beyond the worst one can imagine.

Exclusion: they are practically excluded from all walks of life and especially from the world of employment. They turn in upon themselves and are fearful of leaving their neighborhoods. They are afraid of the unknown in any form and consequently are unable to follow through on a project.

Intellectual poverty: this is easily recognized in the paucity of their vocabulary, the difficulty in handling the language and their inability to progress beyond the simplest thinking. Their intelligence lacks dynamism, their imagination lacks creativity. Their inhibitions, however, are less important than their lack of means.

These diverse details help in understanding the thousand and one difficulties which confront the students of the ATD Center. These difficulties are enhanced when faced with the practical: venturing into an unknown environment, a simple trip to another area of the city, remembering the time for a meeting, keeping to a schedule, incomprehension or poor interpretation of information, in general a paralysis of the young person by a milieu which does not believe in his new-born project.

I have attempted to outline the essential areas in my commitment to and my work with the fourth world. What are the Results? For youth marked by the daily weight of misery interiorized over many years the results are not immediate. Neither is it possible to measure them by the usual criteria. By way of answering the question of results and as a conclusion allow me to cite two remarks by parents of these youth. The first from a mother of an eighteen year old girl who had just completed ten months of instruction at the Center, "She was a girl of the streets now she is a woman". The second from a father, living in an abandoned car on a vacant lot, about his son, "Since he has been going for instruction, he no longer plays the fool and the police do not arrest him anymore".

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