



WHAT THE POOR SAY TO THE CHURCH

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1. Introduction
 2. Symptoms that make one think
 3. Delimiting the problem
 4. The poor and the Church
 5. Conclusion
- Notes
For reflecting and discussing in groups

1. INTRODUCTION

The Church is faced with many issues at the present time. And people are asking many questions about the Church.

But, at this moment in time, there is something that weighs more than the rest. Something very serious, something most urgent. What is it about? We are finishing a century that has been the most violent in the history of humanity. Up to the point that it is simply impossible to calculate in an approximate way the deaths of the millions of victims of the two World Wars and the hundreds of deaths of other wars that have destroyed and are destroying whole nations. However, the most terrifying violence of this century has not been, nor is, the violence of wars.

The biggest violence, that which has caused the most deaths, that which carries on destroying more human lives, is the violence which results from the economy, to be more precise, the economy of the neo-liberal market, in the way it is organised and in the way it functions in point of fact.

It is no exaggeration. Nor is it a gratuitous affirmation.

1. It is not just one of many questions

It is known that currently ten per cent more food is produced in the world for humanity to live on. Nevertheless, 35,000 children die every day of hunger¹. And similar statistics, if not higher, can be affirmed for adults losing their lives as a result of a lack of nutrition. That is to say, the economy is “organised” in a way that it produces every twenty-four hours at least 70,000 deaths. As far as my knowledge goes, there has never been a war whose cruelty has approached similar proportions. Worse still, these statistics keep on rising. With the passing of each year, we have greater numbers of poor people suffering more dire poverty.

As a matter of fact, according to the *Report on Human Development 1996*, of the United Nations, the most significant phenomenon that is taking place in world economy is *the increasing concentration of wealth in less countries, and within these countries, progressively in less people*. With the result that the gap between the rich and poor is every year much wider. This datum is well known. 20 per cent of the world population consumes 85 per cent of the wealth that is produced on this planet. This means to say that 80 per cent of the inhabitants of the earth have to content themselves on 15 per cent of the goods that are produced in the whole world. And I repeat, these are the data of the UNO, based on the situation of things in 1996. Today probably the situation will have worsened.

Can such a world have a future? Can the Church who keeps Christ as its true reference have a good conscience and live peacefully in a world “organisation” which produces so much death and suffering? If the Church says it represents Jesus and His Gospel in the world, what does it have to say in respect of this situation? What does it say in point of fact? And above all, what does it do? These are questions that could surge in anybody's mind. And they are questions that flow not only from the Church to the poor but, above all, *from the poor to the Church*.

For example, what problems do the poor pose to the Church? How should the Church organise itself and function, if it is really ready to reply with honesty and coherence, to what is happening in the world at the present time?

Speaking about the poor and the Church is not therefore “just one of many questions”. It is undoubtedly the most urgent and profound issue that confronts the Church, and for this matter, Christians.

2. Two important clarifications

Before tackling the problem in depth, one needs to clarify two things for honesty and justice sake.

1. In the Church there have always been many, very many people, groups, institutions, organisations of every nature and origin, that have not only concerned themselves about the poor but have also given their entire lives to defend the undertrodden of humanity, putting at stake their most cherished goods, the installation of the same, their prestige, personal safety, all that a human being can stake in this world².

2. The ecclesiastic authority has been elaborating for more than a century a “social doctrine” that, especially in the last thirty years, has reached very strong and accurate formulations in the defence of the poor: their rights, their liberties, their dignity, claiming profound reforms in the world economy and denouncing abuses committed against the most defenceless of this world³. Moreover –and above all– there is the constant preaching of the Gospel, which the Church does in the whole world, ranging from its publications of the strictest scientific nature to the homilies and catechesis that are listened to by thousands of people in almost all corners of the globe.

These are the two facts. And, nevertheless, there exist very strong reasons that compel us to ask ourselves: has the Church resolved the problem of what her relations with the poor *signify and demand*?

What is the reason for this question? It is because there are sufficiently clear symptoms that lead us to suspect, what is more, oblige us to suspect, suspect what? That in the relations of the Church with the poor, there is something very serious, very profound that needs solving.

Let us begin by analysing these symptoms.

2. SYMPTOMS THAT MAKE US THINK

These symptoms are noticed when certain questions are raised which at first sight appear very simple. Questions that to some may appear ingenuous. And which to others, no doubt, may sound strange, probably disconcerting or even quite frankly, annoying. These questions, to be more precise, are four in number:

- *What specific relations does the ecclesiastical institution maintain in fact with the powers that, in practice, are the ones most responsible for determining the current economic organisation?*
- *What place do the poor occupy in the Church?*
- *What influence do the poor exert in the Church?*
- But there is more to it. Probably this is what should make us think most. Things being as they are, it would seem that *for not a few people of the "ecclesiastical world", the poor are regarded as a danger to the Church.*

1. Ecclesiastical institution and economic organisation

The ecclesiastic authorities say, in their sermons and writings, that the Church in accordance with the teachings of the Gospel desires and demands justice for the poor, equality of rights for all citizens, liberty for those who are deprived of freedom. It cannot be denied that this *is said*. But what *is done*? Everybody knows that the ecclesiastical institution tries, with all possible means within her reach, to maintain good relations with political powers in almost all countries. Not only in countries where human rights are respected but also those in which these rights are trampled upon.

On television we have seen very high ecclesiastic dignitaries give communion publicly to dictators who have their hands stained with much innocent blood. To be more specific: to no one is it a secret that Vatican diplomacy tries, as best it can, to get on smoothly with the most influential political governments in world economy and politics. And it is evident that this entails keeping silent on certain affairs, pretending on others, giving way in this or that issue. The fact is that there are countries that wade in abundance. And others in which people die of misery. But the ecclesiastic authorities get on well with all the countries. And everywhere the Pope is applauded and received with the highest honours.

To put just one recent and very sad example: The Vatican was the only State in the world, which recognised the military government, which in a state coup overthrew the democratically elected president of Haiti, J.P. Aristide. This recognition was not a mere diplomatic "slip" but an act contrary to the Gospel. And this judgement has nothing to do with the judgement that Aristide really merits (which is not creditable these days). The proof lies in the fact that other states of the world though more antagonistic towards Aristide than the Vatican, out of sheer formal and elementary respect for the principles of democracy and non-violence refrained from recognising the military junta.

Actually if one examines things dispassionately, does it not give rise to suspicion (suspicion at least) that in this entire affair, something strange is taking place? How is it possible that the one, who cries in defence of the poor, should be acclaimed by those who are most directly responsible for there being so many poor in this world? What is happening in the Church that makes it possible that not only all this should happen this way but that most people should regard it as the most natural thing in the world?

2. What place do the poor have in the Church?

In *theory*, the answer is clear. The poor are, for the Church, what they were for Jesus: the favourite people, the most important, the first. But all this is in theory. Because *in practice*, everybody knows that things frequently function in quite another fashion.

In this we must try to be very precise if we wish to talk not about theories but what is actually happening in life. For example, what place do the poor occupy so often in ecclesiastic ceremonies? Probably they are begging alms at the door of the church. Obviously they do not occupy the first places. Still less in the presbytery. What would they do there? Come in the way. What place do they have in ecclesiastic meetings? What place is given to them in pastoral projects, in diocesan synods or in the discussions of the Roman Curia?

Beyond a shadow of doubt, many of those who read what we have just asked will think these questions are nothing else but nonsensical or fundamentalist rare ideas. But the Christians of the early Church thought differently.

About *the place* that each one occupied or aimed at occupying, was a very serious matter and provided much matter for discussion among those Christians. The Letter of Santiago severely denounces those who seat the poor in worse places than the rich (Sant 2,1-4). And in the Gospels, Jesus rejects with very hard words those who seek the first places (Mark 10,37-40; Mathew 20,21-23; Mark 9,35; 12,38-39; Luke 20,46), because seeking first places constituted for the Pharisees one of their favourite aspirations (Luke 11,43). The Christian community did exactly the opposite: the dominating tendency was to go directly to the last places (Luke 14,7-11) or to be at a banquet not seated comfortably but serving others (Luke 22,27).

Let us say then, that though today this is not viable, we must strive towards making it so in the future: because the question of *the place* that corresponds to each person is no light matter. In all societies, institutions, groups, the place a person occupies expresses his rank, the esteem he merits, the power he wields. And this is what caused so many headaches to Jesus and His disciples. Because Jesus wanted to change at all costs the order set by us according to our conveniences. For Jesus, "the last were the first and the first, the last" (Mathew 20,16).

But it is evident that this radical inversion of thinking just cannot get into our heads. What was Jesus' idea lasted some time in the Church. At the beginning of the third century, the *Didaskalia* (a liturgical and canonical directory of prime importance) rules that when the church community is assembled together at a meeting and no empty seat is available, if a poor person enters, the bishop should get up from his seat for the poor man to occupy it and the bishop should sit on the floor⁴. Naturally such radicalism could not last for long in the Church, especially so when the Church got organised in the fourth century. The poor returned to their place, the last for sure. And the important people recovered their preferential places. Does not this make one suspect (at least, suspect) that we have here a symptom of things that have reached rock bottom?

3. What influence do the poor have in the Church?

We are speaking here of something that is quite obvious: what we usually call an "influential" person. For example, if we have to ask a favour from a bishop, a nuncio or the Vatican, do we resort to the services of a poor man, because that would guarantee success? Does not this sound sheer nonsense? This is precisely what is wrong, a worrying symptom. That this should appear to us so absurd, does it not make us suspect that there are things in the Church that are farther removed from the Gospel than we probably imagined? If it is said and repeated that the poor are our best intercessors and have great influence in heaven, why should they not on earth, if the Church should "anticipate" heaven?

This calls for some explanation

Because the matter is deeper than it appears at the surface. In this life a person has real influence when his participation or intervention works out (more or less) decisive, if he conditions or determines (in whatever way) the decisions that are taken, be it at an assembly, in an institution, in a group, etc.

This taken for granted, certain questions could occur to one: First of all, the most elementary, the most generical sort

of question: what influence do the poor exercise in the important decisions that are taken in the Church? Are they consulted in any way? Are their points of view taken into consideration? Are their points of view considered in any way important? Are the poor consulted when deciding matters of certain importance? Coming down to more concrete topics: can the poor express an opinion when it comes to naming a parish priest, appointing a bishop or, more simply setting up or removing this or that institution that affects them either for better or for worse?

If parish priests complain that they usually have no joint responsibility in the governing of the diocese; if the lay people, in general, have no decisive say in ecclesiastic affairs, what real influence in decision-making can poor people in our Church exercise, since they know nothing of these things, nor do these matters normally interest them, because to be honest, these issues appear to them quite strange, quite distant and probably devoid of any meaning?

What influence do the poor exercise in theology?

But, over and above all that has been previously said, there is something, undoubtedly which is most symptomatic: What influence do the poor have, let us not say in the decisions of the Church, but, above all, in the thinking that is taught and even imposed on believers? Put more clearly: what influence do the poor have in theology? In other words, do the poor influence the way of understanding God, of interpreting the Gospel, of explaining the essence of Christian salvation, etc.?

Here again there will be people to whom questions like these will occur: What do the poor know about theology? Wouldn't the poor be totally out of place in a congress of theologians? Nevertheless, with the Gospel in hand, there is no way out other than taking up seriously these issues, however upsetting they may be. In point of fact, Jesus said on one occasion, in a categorical and disconcerting way, that the Father, Lord of heaven and earth, "hides" (*ékrypsas*) what is most profound in Him⁵ from certain people, while He "reveals" this (*apekálypsas*) to others (Mathew 11,25).

Now then, the surprising thing, according to Jesus, is that "the learned and knowledgeable people" are precisely the ones who are not properly acquainted with the affair of God, whereas those who understand it are literally speaking, "those who have nothing to say", since this is exactly the term used in the Gospel: *nepioi*⁶. We have to be blind not to realise that in reality what Jesus has done when He said what I have just mentioned is to question radically our theology. Because the truth is that the theology that is developed in the Church is elaborated by those whom we consider learned and knowledgeable experts, while in this way of thinking and speaking the *nepioi*, that is to say, the ones who, according to Jesus, are informed about the matter, are kept out without being able to say anything.

It is a question really of coming to understand that the God who is revealed in Jesus is a God that is not reached by human effort nor by study, nor by speculation undertaken by the most intellectually-gifted men.

This has been expressed ever since the times of St. Augustine, if not earlier. However, what has happened is that this has been reduced to "pure theology", that is to say, to pure theory. And its concrete expression could be seen in the treatise on grace, a "super-natural" reality, which is above what is purely historical, sociological, economic, cultural and exclusively of this world. And this is how "theological knowledge" was worked out, always counting on the grace of God (this for granted)⁷, but at the moment of truth, was and continues to be the wisdom of "the learned and the experts".

However, Jesus did not focus the problem this way. In the Gospel, the "theological" and the "sociological" are blended together to such an extent that they leave us who supposedly "know and understand", quite disconcerted. For this reason, St. Paul (who must have been better versed in these subjects than us) dared to formulate this matter in an insolent and provocative way. St. Paul's affirmation sounds quite astonishing: "when God made manifest His knowledge, the world did not recognise God through knowledge" (1 Cor 1,21).

What does this mean? It refers to the "failure" that results when one tries to attain the divine through "persuasive words of human wisdom" (1 Cor 2,4). Because, as it has been said so well, though men have had the possibility to know God through "His eternal power and divinity" (Rom 1,20), this type of knowledge ended in failure: their knowledge was reduced to a dead science, which even degenerated into shameful idolatry (Rom 1,21-23)⁸. "For this reason God considered it right to save those who believe in this madness that we preach" (1 Cor 1,21). In this way God laid aside what had "power" and followed the path of "weakness" (1 Cor 1,25). This is the "theology" as taught by Paul.

But what is essential now is to realise that this "theology" came to life and made history by a disconcerting "sociological act". It was Paul himself who explained it in a straight forward way: "Let's see a wise man, let's see a learned person, let's see a scholar of this world!" (1 Cor 1,20). Paul too discredited the learned and knowledgeable

experts.

Who then are the ones that understand the things of God? It seems they are not the "intellectuals", nor the "powerful", nor the "people from a good family" (1 Cor 1,26). And to clear all doubt in the matter, Paul goes on to give the list: "God chose the foolish of this world to humble the learned, and the weak of the world to humble the strong; and God chose the common people of the world, the despised, those that do not exist to annul those that do exist" (1 Cor 27-28). It is not possible to reach lower down.

Now then, according to Jesus and St. Paul, it is only from below that one can know, understand and assimilate God and what relates to God. It is seen that the poor have the decisive word or are the deciding factor in what should be the central nucleus of the *thinking* of the Church. That is to say, if the Church really decides to be faithful to Jesus.

Which, said in another way, is equivalent to affirming that, in the teaching of the Church, the poor have always some word to say, which whether we like it or not, is and will always be decisive. Therefore, the fundamental problem for the Church is not only to evangelise the poor, but also to allow itself to be evangelised by them.

This third symptom is, possibly, more worrying than the previous ones. Because if everything that we have just recalled (from the gospel of Mathew to the first letter to the Corinthians) is true, then the inevitable question is: Is our knowledge of God, is theology, a matter that has been resolved in the Church? From the moment that the poor have had and have nothing to say regarding this matter, have we not deprived ourselves of the most decisive source of knowledge and understanding of the Gospel?

4. Are the poor regarded as a danger to the Church?

But there is still more to it. Probably what should make us think is that things being as they are, it would seem that *for not a few people of the ecclesiastic world, the poor are regarded as a danger to the Church.*

When saying this, it is not our intention to provocatively exaggerate or to infuriate people. The facts meet the eye of everybody.

1. For centuries the poor have been the *object* of help and almsgiving in the Church. But they have never been the *subject* of decisions and thinking among the ecclesiastic and for the ecclesiastic clergy. In the last thirty years, however, a change has been brought about. First, John XXIII began to speak of the "Church of the poor". That did not please some⁹ and we know that there were professors of ecclesiology who (literally) laughed at this expression.

Later came the "theology of hope" (Moltmann), the "political theology" (Metz) and the "ascending Christologies", that affirmed in a decisive tone that Christian salvation is made manifest in history and in society. And they said exactly that Christology is not to be dissociated from soteriology. Putting it in other words, the constitution of Christology is soteriological (W. Kasper), which means to say, among other things, that Jesus "was constituted Son of God... by His resurrection from death" (Rom 1,4). But we know that the death and resurrection of Christ presupposes the life He led and cannot be dissociated from that life (cf Rom 1.3): *the life of a poor man who was born and who lived among the poor.*

And this is what appears unpleasant, and probably even embarrassing, to some people. Because Jesus coming from heaven is admirable, sublime and what have you. But a Jesus who comes from among the poor, does not arouse any admirable or sublime feelings; on the contrary, this sort of Jesus probably disturbs many people and in any case, raises quite a few questions.

2. Herein began the *danger*, which is perceived by some souls and by some "Church people". But the situation got more serious when, in the early seventies, there appeared a theology that put the poor precisely in the very centre of their concerns, their problems and solutions.

What happened then and in the following years is (however much one thinks about it) something quite difficult to explain. For one reason: for centuries, many centuries, theology had concerned itself with the poor only to measure the quantity of almsgiving that the rich had to give the needy, in order that the rich could keep a tranquil conscience; or to exhort the well-off to be generous with the unfortunate poor of this life.

And though the Gospel gave so much importance to the poor, nobody had ever asked himself if the poor should have something more to say in theology and in the Church. This is strange but could be forgiven. What however is really difficult to understand is that when for the first time in history, theology dared to affirm that the poor should have a

decisive say in divine matters, when it declared that the poor should be heard, and that keeping them as a reference point, one had to re-think theological knowledge, a big scandal was raised in not a few ecclesiastic quarters: the Vatican became worried, bishops affirmed that this theology divided the Church, theologians fired their heaviest artillery against what they considered the most terrible perversion of theology.

Without doubt, the short history of the theology of liberation is the most patent proof that for many “Church folk” the poor are a real *danger*, when the poor are taken seriously and with all the consequences that result from this posture.

Indeed, the four questions that have been raised confirm the suspicion that to speak about the *poor* and the *Church* (or better still: about the challenge that the poor pose to the Church) is to speak about a problem that is more profound than many imagine. To understand it better, it would be convenient at this point to delimit the problem.

3. DELIMITING THE PROBLEM

Let nobody get disturbed thinking that we are going to put in doubt the dogmas of the Church. Firstly, because if we wish to live in communion of faith with the Church, we cannot naturally cast overboard her dogmas. Secondly, because if the Church has not duly resolved the problem of her relations with the poor, this is not because there is any dogmatic question involved.

The problems that the poor pose to us do not stem primarily from *ideas* people have but from their *sensitivity*. Or said in another way: to be or not to be on the side of the poor, is not a question that depends primarily on whether one has these or those ideas in one's head, but on whether one *is or is not sensitive to the suffering of the weak*.

This needs some explanation.

1. It is not a problem of dogma

Right from the start we should never forget that the “clerical mentality” distinguishes itself, among other things, as being a “dogmatic mentality”. We, “Church folk” are accustomed to think that “doctrinal affirmations” have more importance than they really have. And so, some (conservative-minded) imagine that the affirmation of such and such truths resolve the problems that life poses. While others (who are renovation-biased) imagine that precisely by denying these truths, one is able to resolve life adequately. Without a doubt, both groups are right in part –but only in part, a small part. Because life is indescribably more complex than ideas. And we know only too well that with relative frequency people with excellent ideas commit unthinkable outrages against certain other people.

More precisely, as we will soon see, the problem, which in great measure arises in the correct relationship between the Church and the poor, is the problem of power. But this does not refer in any way to the dogmatic questions, which in one way or the other relate to the apostolic quality of the Church, the apostolic succession, the ecclesiastic hierarchy and the exercise of authority which corresponds to the hierarchy.

Or to put it more clearly: the problem of the poor and the Church does not depend *on the authority* that exists (and which has to exist) in the Church, but *in the way* that authority is exercised. For one reason which one will readily understand: in practice, the *origin* of authority is often confused with the *extension* of this authority. From which follows that: if the origin is *divine* (authority comes from God), the extension is *unlimited* (who is going to put limits to a divine authority?) And this is translated into a way of exercising power whose centre is power itself instead of those who power should serve.

From the moment things function this way (more than ever things are deduced this way), power in the Church is over-magnified. With the consequences that we will see later. But this is not a dogmatic affair, that is to say, it is not a question of truths and ideas. It is a phenomenon, which has its roots more in the nature of how people are. More precisely, *in the sensitivity* of each one.

Because everything depends on whether our sensitivity is oriented towards power or towards the suffering of the weak. To put an example: without a doubt, Innocent III and Francis of Assisi both professed the same “creed”, the truths of faith of one and the other were the same. But Innocent III did not have enough calling himself the “vicar of

Peter” and so began calling himself “vicar of Christ”, while Francis of Assisi said that whenever he came across someone poorer than himself, he would feel like a thief. It is not a question of “dogmas” but a question of “sensitivity”.

2. Neither is it a purely economic problem

If we speak about the poor, we are speaking about a money matter, more exactly about people who lack the economic means indispensable for living. And this is true. But only half true. Because money, important though it is, is not everything in life. For this reason, from this very moment it must be made quite clear that the problem that exists in the relationship between the poor and the Church, cannot be reduced simply to the economic plane.

It is something, which throws its roots deeper down, in the depth of human existence itself. And this is what is probably not fully understood both by some who resolutely defend the theology of liberation and some others of the other extreme who have unwisely and immoderately attacked that theology.

One understands this better when one takes account of the following fact: in the gospels appear four groups of people with whom Jesus showed solidarity, up to the point of risking His prestige, His safety and His life in their defence. There appear in the opposite sense, four other groups of people that Jesus was up against, up to the point that cost Him His life. The four groups with which Jesus showed solidarity were the sick, the poor, the publicans (with the sinners) and women. The four groups He was up against were the Pharisees, the Scribes (the learned people), the priests and the ancients (senators).

It is true that in the Jewish society of the times of Jesus, there were other sufficiently defined groups. In the first place, the Sadducees who ideologically were different from the Pharisees but who in practice were identified with the High Priests and the senators or ancients. That is to say, both the sacerdotal aristocracy as well as the lay nobility belonged to the party of the Sadducees, among other things because this was the party of more liberal and tolerant ideas in the matter of religion¹⁰. On the other hand, there were the political revolutionaries (later known as “zealots”), who fought for the liberation of the Jewish people from the oppression of the Romans¹¹. Keeping aloof from either of these two parties were the Esenios who sought to find God by retiring to the desert to pray and do penance¹². The Gospel speaks very seldom about these three groups. For this reason we shall focus on the other eight (four on one side and four on the other) around which the public life of Jesus revolved: His controversial life and violent death.

What is important here is to reply to the following question: *What did the four groups which Jesus showed solidarity with have in common and likewise, what did the other four groups that He was up against have in common?*

Approaching the question this way, the answer is clear: what they had in common both the first and the second four groups had nothing to do with money. Because neither the four which He showed solidarity with, were poor; nor the four which He was up against, were rich. In the ranks of the Publicans you had both rich and otherwise, and the Gospels seem to distinguish between the “Publican chiefs” (*architelones*: cf. Luke 19,2) who were owners of many control points and very rich like Zachary, and the simple tax-collectors (*telones*: Cf. Luke 5,27), who were subleased in some control point, and whose financial situation was quite different. This would explain the different reaction of Zachary (“give half”, “return four-fold”) and that of Levi before the call of the Lord. Whatever be the case, it is true that Jesus was in good relations with many of these men¹³, who handled a lot of money, frequently badly acquired (since the norms regarding taxes were not well defined and were badly known by the people and so easily lent themselves to extortion and abuse)¹⁴. Besides as these taxes were often collected for the Romans, the tax collectors were considered to act in collaboration with the oppressing power and were consequently the target of general hate and disdain¹⁵. For this reason, publicans and tax collectors were the ones who were the most excluded from society.

In contrast with this attitude, Jesus, we know, strongly attacked the Scribes and Pharisees, who, we have been told, had some in their ranks that were rich (as the one who invited Jesus according to Luke 7, 36), whereas many others of them, as confirmed by the documents we have of this period¹⁶, were in reality quite poor. The Scribes or doctors of the law were not allowed to charge for their services and gained their livelihood partly from other jobs of dubious reputation, or from the alms they received¹⁷. And the Pharisees, we have been told, were counted not within the superior class of society but among the class of people who did not have the intellectual formation of the Scribes¹⁸.

We conclude, therefore, that economic poverty was really not the common element underlying the four groups that Jesus showed solidarity with. Solidarity with the sick was closeness to the poor (Luke 18, 35) just as it was to people of good social standing (Mark 5, 35; John 4, 46; 11, 1-44), although the fact was that many sick people were often considered to be impure, which led to their being excluded from society. And in the case of women, who were also defended by Jesus, even when they were of bad reputation, we know that some of those who accompanied Him were

people of high social standing (Luke 8,3) who could afford to incur in scandalously high expenses (John 12, 3-5).

And in the same way we can say that what united the four groups which Jesus attacked, was not their powerful nor even their well-to-do economic condition. It should remain very clear that Jesus denounced vigorously the dangers of riches because it is authentic idolatry (Mathew 6, 9-21.24; Luke 6, 24; 16, 11-12), incapacitates people from entering the Kingdom of God (Mathew 19,24) and makes salvation impossible (Mathew 13, 22; Luke 16, 19). But no doubt to the mind of Jesus there is something that is more dangerous than money. Because in this “something” lies the root of the dangerousness of money.

This means to say that according to the Gospel, the deepest harm that men cause to each other does not lie only or principally on the economic plane.

Money is a decisive factor in the tragedy of the poor. This is evident. But Jesus clearly saw that in this matter other factors intervene which are what ultimately determine the situation. Especially when in such a situation, religion plays a role. And this is exactly the case here when one tries to analyse the relations between the poor and the Church. Exactly what we are trying to do here.

3. Deep down human nature

Jesus was born in a stable, where animals live. And died on a cross, where in those times the most dangerous and undesirable delinquents were made to end their lives. All this did not happen by sheer chance, nor is it unimportant for our faith. Because, taking as a reference point these facts, believers in Jesus affirm that the ideal of man and of life, which gives an account of our deepest convictions is the ideal which is resumed in the existence of a person who lived (from beginning to end) on the margin of society.

Now then, to talk about exclusion is to talk about something that reaches deep down human nature. Because the worst effect that exclusion entails is *the loss of dignity*: lacking the rights others have and not getting the respect that any normal person gets. And for this reason, *lack of dignity* is the worst thing *poverty* brings along to a person.

Or said in a better way, lack of dignity is worse than poverty itself. People are accustomed to say: “poor but honourable”. Because honour and dignity are the most serious and precious of things that can be lost. Or said differently, honour and dignity are what human beings fancy most.

Going a step further, we may say that if human beings fancy money so much, it is not principally because of the material advantages that money provides. People and institutions fancy money, above all, for the security, power, influence, the mighty feeling, the social status, respectability, in short, for the fascinating power that money wields in our society. Marx made a mistake in many things. But there was one thing he was absolutely right about: the “fetishist character” of capital, something which acquires a “mystical character”, almost religious, “a very complex thing, crammed with metaphysical subtleties and theological sophisms”¹⁹.

To sum up, all that we have said before signifies that deep down in human nature what matters most is not precisely the desire for riches but a yearning for *security, honour and power*. Though it is true that *what is most urgent* is having the necessary means so as not to die of hunger, the deepest aspiration of human nature is “to be like gods” (cf. Gen 3,5), *to be and to possess without limit*, aspirations that cannot be reduced to the economic plane alone but which focus, above all, on the *desire for power*.

Having said this, it would be well to recall the very wide cultural gap that separates life in our modern industrialised societies from that of the times of Jesus.

To say this in a few words, probably the biggest difference lies in that the determining value in our culture focuses around *economy*, whereas in the culture prevailing during the time of Jesus, the determining value revolved around *honour*. Recent studies of cultural anthropology about the central values of the Mediterranean world in the first century seem to demonstrate with sufficient clarity that the claim to one's own worth and social recognition were the most appreciated values, and, therefore, most influential in the society in which Jesus lived²⁰.

Keeping in mind this state of affairs, we can now understand why Jesus showed solidarity with the four groups of people which, in that society, were exactly *the most excluded people of the system*: the most exploited, the most despised, even (as in the case of the publicans and sinners) the most hated in society; in any case, those that meant nothing or had no say in that culture. And on account of this we can understand too why Jesus was up against the four groups that excluded, despised and hated the other four groups.

4. The religious factor

We are speaking about the “poor” and the “Church”. This implies that we are speaking about the *poor* and *religion*. We must, therefore, try to understand *how the religious factor affects relations with the poor* in a very special way. Something which many people will probably never imagine.

From this point of view, the first thing that we should keep in mind is that the exclusion which Jesus encountered in the society of His people and His times was an exclusion produced by religion.

It is convenient to recall here something that the whole world knows, but which is not always kept in mind: religions, as a general rule, have preached (in one way or another) love to our neighbour; but it is less certain that religions, very frequently, have divided and keep on dividing people, groups and nations, to the point of inciting hatred, armed conflict and death.

In the society and in the times of Jesus, religion divided the population into two categories that were radically contrasted, and even antagonistic. On the one hand, were the *haber*, who considered themselves the blameless, authentic people in matters of religion; and on the other hand, the *`amme haArez*, ignorant people without studies, who on account of their religious ignorance and moral behaviour were considered impure and to whom, therefore, the door of access to salvation was closed²¹.

Now then, according to the data that we find in *Misna*¹ the clashes and even the incompatibility between these two classes of people had reached such a point that, for example, “if the wife of a *haber* were to allow the wife of a *`amme haArez* to use the grinder in her house... the house would be rendered impure”²². That is to say, the observance or non-observance of religion (with the religious knowledge that this demanded) divided the population in such a way and to such limits that practisers of religion could have no dealings with non-practisers since such contacts would dishonour them before the town and God Himself.

Well, in this situation, the gospels provide us with abundant data of the stance Jesus adopted in that society and in those circumstances. To put it briefly: Jesus put Himself decidedly on the side of all those people who for one reason or another were considered undesirable, despicable, impure before God and men. These people could be summed up in the above-mentioned four groups: the sick, who were associated with sin and impurity²³; the poor, who on account of their religious ignorance were unable to fulfil the divine law²⁴; the publicans and sinners, especially excluded and hated, as has already been said; and women, who in that culture were the most socially excluded people²⁵.

As may be expected, this stance of Jesus immediately provoked clashes with the *haber(im)*, those who knew the religious law down to the minutest detail; and the observers of the said law in all its most meticulous demands. We are referring here, as we all know, to the clashes with the “Scribes and Pharisees”, which ended finally in the decisive and mortal confrontation with the High Priests and ancients or senators. All this is well known. And it is not necessary to explain this here.

Only one thing is left to be explained, which is decisive in this matter. These four groups, as has already been said, did not coincide in their economic situation as the High Priests and senators were almost all immensely rich, while the Scribes and Pharisees were normal people and many of them rigorously poor.

What united them all was an underlying religious attitude, that consisted of their *religious knowledge* (knowledge of the Law) and their *religious behaviour* (the observance of the mandates of the Law). This “knowledge” and this “behaviour” gave them a feeling of security and superiority, that in practice made it impossible for them to understand the weak and excluded people. And, above all, it practically prevented them from drawing near to the weak, from taking interest in their concrete situation, from really loving them and, still less from showing them solidarity.

Probably the evangelical text which best synthesises all this, is the Parable of the Pharisee and the Publican (Luke 18,9-14). The Parable describes a type of people who are characterised by the following qualities: 1) they feel “sure” of themselves; 2) because they consider themselves “just” or people close to God; 3) “despise” others (Luke 18,9). We are dealing here with people in whom religion (the conviction of being close to God) had produced three effects: firstly, *self-confidence*; secondly, *conviction of superiority* with respect to others who do not think or act like themselves; thirdly, *disdain* towards others who live differently from the way they do. All these three effects are expressed in the prayer of the Pharisee (Luke 18, 11-12).

No doubt, what Jesus saw as most dangerous in the men He was confronted with was something more serious than their attachment to money. It was the radical perversion of the person, the *anthropological perversion* which religion is capable of producing and in fact does produce in individuals when it is used by them to reinforce their own personality,

¹ *Collection of oral Jewish traditions (II c. AD) which was later completed in the Talmud.*

to feel superior to others and, consequently, to end despising all that is human weakness in this world. And this is most dangerous for two reasons. Firstly, because the individual, in this case, is incapable of suspecting, still less, realising what is happening to him, on the contrary, he thinks it is he who is close to God. Secondly, because this sort of person turns radically incapable of loving anybody else, more so if it is a question of people who do not coincide with his way of viewing life, of thinking and acting. Something which can (and usually) occurs when the people in question are of the marginal type, excluded for economic, ethic, religious, cultural or political reasons... in other words, the weak peoples of this world!

5. The “men of religion” and the poor

Let nobody get the idea that by saying what has been said before, we are insinuating (still less affirming) that today's Church is filled with Scribes and Pharisees as was Judaism in the times of Jesus. To make such a statement and establish such a parallelism would be not only manifestly untrue but would be seriously unjust. This should be made clear, before all else. Because we know only too well that in the Church (that of today and of all times) there are countless numbers of men and women who live the spirit of the Gospel, the mystique of Jesus, in the strictest and most demanding sense, precisely in what refers to solidarity with the weakest and most excluded ones of this world. This before anything else.

But, if what has just been said is certain, it is no less true that one would have to be blind not to notice the constant danger that threatens the “men of religion”. The danger that consists of understanding and living the beliefs and religious practices in such a way that the individual without realising it, re-enacts in himself what happened in the case of the Pharisees of Jesus' times.

It is a question, moreover, of something that is quite well known by everybody that in one way or another is associated with circles of a religious background. As a matter of fact, it is known that in these circles, one frequently meets people who internalise in such a way their beliefs and religious practices that in point of fact they are: *people who are sure of themselves, at times so sure of themselves that for nothing in the world are they ready to change even a fraction of an inch their religious convictions.*

It is precisely because they consider themselves in possession of the untouchable truth, these same people, without realising it, harbour and even defend an obscure (but real) feeling of superiority, especially when they give thanks to God for having preserved them from so much corruption and lack of orientation that exists in this world. Finally, even if somebody were to tear the skin off their backs, in no way would they be ready (those who think this way) to be or to live in the world like those depraved people all around who lack the most elementary dignity, be it religious, ethical or social.

Naturally these things are not said in so many words. But it is a fact that there are individuals who feel and live this way. It is a fact too that this is a class of people who abound much more than we care to imagine. And it is a fact that this could be a typical product of religion. Because it is precisely this specific notion of “what is holy” and “what is sacred” the ultimate determining factor that gives them the *security* they feel, the *superiority* they hiddenly enjoy, the profound *disdain* towards their less fortunate brethren. And what is also true is that not only do they not acknowledge consciously the above sentiments but what is more dangerous they who go through life this way, are profoundly persuaded that it is this way and only this way that everybody should think and act.

Well, in the measure in which religion produces (as it often does) this sort of people, we can understand why in religious circles, things happen that are not only not easy to explain but also (speaking in Christian terms) are really diagonally opposed to the Gospel, though paradoxically enough –and this is the limit– they are viewed with all the naturalness in the world. In tis way with respect to religion the Latin saying is proved true: “*corruptio optimi pessima*” (there is nothing worse than the corruption of the very good).

But let us descend to more concrete things. As we are speaking about the poor and, in general, about excluded people that abound in our society, we know it is a secret to no one, for example, that not rarely do we meet “men of the Church” who get impatient and are even irritated by the simple fact that some liturgical norm is not observed in all its exactitude, while at the same time, are not concerned, do not remember, much less are irritated, by the fact that there are people suffering, even dying of hunger or abandonment near, perhaps very near, where they are celebrating or hearing Mass.

Naturally, when something of this nature occurs, a person should ask himself: What hierarchy of values is observed by people who behave in this fashion? Unfortunately everybody knows that in temples, chapels and convents, more

situations of impatience, irritation and disgust (at times even complaints to the competent authorities) are produced on account of some liturgical norm not being observed than by the drastic and grave abandonment of people who suffer more than they deserve to. Naturally, this passes off as a mere example of little importance. But if one reflects a bit, it serves to suspect that there is very much more to it than some may imagine.

Another more eloquent example. It is a fact that in “religious” circles, when (for whatever reason) the topic of the poor is discussed, especially if the topic is discussed in depth, without knowing exactly why, a certain uneasiness is frequently created and felt, and a sort of anxiety, suspicions and, not unseldomly, an atmosphere of obvious tension is reached with the concomitant discussion and annoyance of almost everybody. Why? It is symptomatic that this type of situations are not given rise to if the matter does not go further than saying, as is reasonable, that one should “help” the poor, “give aid” to the needy, organise this or that charity campaign, give alms on the day of fraternal love and things of a similar nature. Precisely when conversation is kept down to these good projects and nothing deeper down, the participants at these meetings finish with the feeling that they are doing the best that they could possibly do in the world.

The unpleasant situation is produced when, as has been said, the topic is discussed “with certain depth”; that is to say, if we are not satisfied with “help” and “alms” (similar to what was given by the rich in Treasury of the Temple: cf. Mark 12, 41 and Luke 21, 1), but want to go to the bottom of things. Don Helder Câmara, Brazil's great Bishop-Prophet, used to say: “when I give alms to a poor person, I am called a saint; if I ask why he is poor, I am dubbed a communist”. And it is then when the trouble starts. Because, it is clear that to talk about the poor “in-depth”, is to talk about the economy, about politics.

And this leads us immediately to make our mind known about the political right and left wings, about socialisms, dictatorships, democracies, capitalism, neoliberalism, revolutions and wars, in a word, topics of the most serious nature in this life. All this probably explains why the topic of the poor appears to be so conflicting and can end putting us all on edge.

But here, we are speaking of the “men of religion” and the poor. And so if the uneasiness and annoyance mentioned above is a fact, it could only mean that we are plumbing (without realising it) the deepest strata of the human personality. Because talking about “the poor”, from the view point of religion, and more concretely, from the view point of Christianity, is not talking simply about a question of “money” but rather, and this is important, about a matter of “power”, of personal worth and of dignity.

We have already seen, when explaining Jesus' views regarding “the poor” that He associated them with the publicans and sinners, with the sick (culturally associated with sin), with women even when they were prostitutes, pagans, impure, adulteresses or Samaritans. That is to say, to Jesus' mind, to talk about “the poor” was to talk about “weak” and “excluded” people. And when He spoke about these people, He placed them in the centre itself of life, in the limelight of His projects and preferences.

Well, this is exactly what sounds “madness” and “scandalous” to us “men of religion” (cf. 1 Cor 1, 22-25). Because this does not only nor mainly concern our pockets, but rather, in a big way, our dignity, our good name and, more than anything else, our respectability and the powers we so greatly aspire. It concerns all what St. Paul called later “the justification” of man.

On account of this, in ecclesiastical circles, there are many people ready “to help” the poor, even “to evangelise” the poor. But let us be sincere. How many “men of the Church” are truly convinced that we have “to learn” from the poor? What can they “teach” us, especially in such “technical” matters such as those relating to God, to Jesus, to the Gospel? How many of those holding responsible positions in the Church are truly ready to ask advice and be assessed by the poor? Still more, to whose mind would the idea ever occur that the poor could be jointly responsible (in whatever way, however small) in the government of parishes, dioceses, the entire Church?

We could carry on posing questions of this nature. Questions, which undoubtedly to some would appear sheer nonsense. To others, they would give the impression of fundamentalism that really makes no sense. And there would definitely be some who would regard talking about these things as not worth their while. This sort of reactions go to confirm that those are not off the mark who suspect that the deep uneasiness that is created in many ecclesiastical circles on account of the theology of liberation, has its true cause in the fact that the poor not only have no influence whatever in the Church, but especially (what is more worrying) are seen by not a few “men of religion” as a “danger” to the Church.

Why so? For the simple reason that to let poor people have a say in the matter, to give them a leading role, to try to have society and institutions (including the Church) organise themselves according to the criteria and interests of the poor, are things that would pose a threat to our much desired *security*, our feeling of *superiority* and our badly disguised

disdain towards all that is related to exclusion and weakness in the system.

When Jesus said to the “men of religion” of His times that “the publicans and the prostitutes will enter the Kingdom of God before you” (Mathew 21, 31), He was committing an act of terrible imprudence. Because, in addition to insulting those respectable men, He was turning religion upside down. And this is what apparently cannot enter our heads. Because a hundred years have gone by and many of us “men of the Church” insist on being ourselves the very first to enter. And it is not a question here (as we sometimes hear people say) of “mythifying” the poor –who can be as much sinners as the publicans, etc.– but of “unmythifying” ourselves before God as men of the Church.

4. THE POOR AND THE CHURCH

With all that has been said above, we appear to be arriving at the last consequences. Because if indeed not a few of us “men of the Church” are reproducing (without probably even suspecting it) the type of religious deformation which Jesus denounced, then we will have to recognise that this deformation does not affect *people alone*.

This is reflected inevitably, in one way or another, *also in the institution*. Especially if we bear in mind that when talking about the “men of the Church”, we are talking too, and more specially so, about the “ones who direct”, those who (for one reason or another) have responsibility, authority, and finally, “power” in the Church.

But before going further, we would like readers to mark our words: It is all important to remember, once again, that when talking about this affair, it is not our intention, even for an instant, to question (still less, deny) the hierarchical structure of the Church.

The problem does not lie in the *structure*. The problem is in the *organisation* and in the *functioning* of this structure. That is to say, it is not about a dogmatic truth but how, “in practice” the ecclesiastic “power” has been organised and functions. Anybody, who has read a manual of the history of the Church, knows perfectly well that the matter of ecclesiastic power has been exercised in very different ways all along the centuries. This simple checking of history points out, among other things, that what is being done now, could be equally done *in quite a different manner*.

Assuming this, we shall try to explain what would seem to be the most decisive issue in the relations between the Church and the poor. Or, to be more precise, *the most determinant issue in the relations between the ecclesiastic authorities with the poor*.

1. The problem is not people but world structures

In the first place, it is a well-known fact, that there are many, very many, bishops, priests and religious (both men and women) who currently are dedicating their lives wholeheartedly to the poor with a generosity that defies description. But, having said this, we are still without an answer to the issue that confronts us. Because the problem does not lie in whether there is more or less generosity shown by certain ecclesiastics. Neither does the problem lie in whether the Church has more or less charitable institutions which evidently alleviate the suffering of many people.

The question is deeper down. It is the world economic system, to be more specific, neoliberalism that has brought about that at this moment there are so many millions of people doomed to extermination on account of hunger.

Speaking more precisely: Everybody knows that at the end of this millennium, two amazing phenomena are being developed at an extremely accelerated pace: *globalisation* and *exclusion*. We know that globalisation is, above all, an economic phenomenon: the economy and the market are so interconnected that there is no corner of the world that escapes their influence. But we know too that this influence is not the same for everybody. Because this globalisation has been organised to benefit some at the expense of excluding many others.

It is certainly known that the current economy offers real possibilities to cover the basic needs of all human beings. But it is equally known that this globalisation is, in fact, organised, controlled and directed by the triad formed by Europe, the United States and Japan. Well, this triad has organised the world economic structure in such a way that, in practice, two thirds of humanity are excluded from the benefits of globalisation. Allow us to leave one thing clear

which is fundamental: the excluded people are everywhere, in both rich and poor countries, both in the First and Third worlds. Naturally the quantity of excluded people in the under-developed countries is breath taking, since they embrace practically the totality of the population. Whereas in wealthy countries, the excluded are marginal people who form what is called the Fourth World. But let us bear this very much in mind: the excluded people are everyday closer to our doorstep.

On the other hand, we should never forget that the excluded are the inevitable result of the voracity of the system, which is embodied in institutions and in particular people, in those who govern, in financial magnates, in Board Directors and those who plan the strategies of multinational companies.

Let us not be naive. It is not something, which has taken place without our knowing how nor why. All this has been the result of calculations, studies and planning carried out by names that can be mentioned, by people with faces we can recognise, and naturally with their bank accounts, fat to bursting point, in the safest banking institutions of the world.

And this, which is dramatic in itself, turns out even more unbearable and bloody when they are produced in poor countries, for example, when certain ruling people accumulate amazing wealth at the cost of the misery and death of entire populations. This is the state of things at this moment.

2. The ecclesiastic institution vis-à-vis world structures

And then, the question is: *how does the ecclesiastic institution place itself and how does it act vis-à-vis political and economic powers that, in one way or another, are responsible for this state of affairs?*

On the theoretical level, we know the “social doctrine” of the Church is clear and eloquent, demanding justice and solidarity for all. But in this order of things, theories have very limited power. The problem is in knowing what the ecclesiastic institution is doing (and not doing) on the practical level.

But can it do more than what it is doing? This is the heart of the matter. Really it all depends on how the “ecclesiastic power” is organised and exercised. And also how that power is placed vis-à-vis other powers, the “economic power” and the “political power”. Having reached this point, there is no way out other than getting down to specific details which are without doubt the most eloquent. For example, how are bishops nominated in the Church? That is to say, what criteria are followed at the time of designating the people who most decisively mark the behaviour of the ecclesiastic institution? It is evident that here we are touching a very vital issue. Because if things are organised to have a *particular type* of bishops, it is because we want a *particular type* of Church. Well, we know *with certainty* that at least in certain countries of the Third World, when the Nuncios of the Holy See ask for secret reports to elect a candidate for the episcopate, they ask, among other things, if the candidate in question maintains good relations with the ruling people and with the military command of the country.

It is evident that this criterion brings to light one of the darkest and most worrying points that currently besets the organisation of the ecclesiastical institution. Because the whole world knows well enough up to what levels of corruption a great many ruling members and military men have reached in a century that has been pathetically bloody due, more often than not, to these special individuals.

And then we are caught in the curious situation where on the one hand, the Church publishes brilliant documents demanding justice and respect for human rights and on the other hand while saying so, organises things in such a way that all necessary steps are taken, including the requirement to keep most severe secrets and even threatening with excommunication (sic) those who are in positions of authority in the Church in order that they remain in good terms with those who are directly responsible for the biggest injustices and the most brutal trampling upon of human rights.

How can one be surprised then to hear on occasions terrible accusations of connivance of certain hierarchies with criminal powers (the case, for example, of Argentina) or the other way around, the lessening of confidence of the institution in those bishops who make things uncomfortable for the powers of this world (Brazil or Mgr. Romero)?

This being the state of affairs, the following question might occur to one: what does the Church really want *at the moment of truth?* Defend its power? Or defend the victims of the powers of this world? It is painful to have to raise this question to oneself. And especially to have to raise it in public. But things have reached such a stage that to maintain silence before this situation would entail connivance. For the sake of honesty, coherence, the effort we make to lead a life of dignity, which is something that can and should be demanded of every human being, we cannot forget that such connivance is the most efficacious lever that the system needs to carry on the escalation of its outrages at the cost of so much human suffering.

Of course, it is not “prudent” to say these things. And it is probable that not a few “difficulties” could follow as a

result. The question is knowing if at a given moment, the most advisable path to follow is “prudence” or “audacity” (*parresía* according to the New Testament). At the present moment, when so much suffering is at stake, so much humiliation, so much death, it seems that the only reasonable path is that of *parresía*. Because the difficulties that follow, however strong they may be, should *without a doubt* be relegated to second place.

3. The ecclesiastic structures

On the other hand, the “distrust” and even “fears” of the ecclesiastic institution in relation to the poor and marginal people of the system, reveal themselves in this other form: in the open resistance of the ruling ecclesiastics to the possibility of the poor intervening, participating or feeling jointly responsible in the government of the Church.

This explains why the institution rejects what in its essence the ecclesial base communities have represented over the last thirty years and their proposals of a Church “of the poor”, a Church “of the people”, and the like. As far as we know, these communities have never attempted to organise a “parallel” Church. They have never wished to set themselves up as “sects”. They have never rejected the authority of the bishops. Then, what is the reason for all these fears and distrust that the institution bears towards these most unfortunate people of the world?

Many a manual of Church history informs us very abundantly in what way (more than we imagine) her history has been influenced by emperors, feudal lords, kings and magnates, governing bodies and politicians, dictators and even tyrants who have had their hands stained with much human blood. Too frequently have these situations been tolerated and even approved in the high spheres of ecclesiastic power. The problem, the intolerable problem, is posed when it has been the poor, the miserable ones of this world who have had the audacity to speak up, to participate (even in a small way) in parochial decisions or in the general orientation of the dioceses. When this has happened, the warning red light is lit up and all necessary measures are taken to check this danger. For this reason, among other things, the theology of liberation has been regarded as a grave threat. And for this reason again everything possible has been done to check or modify the influence of CELAM in Latin America.

For this reason too, the nominations of bishops have been prepared with a selective criterion so as not to repeat the case of Medellín or of Puebla. Indeed, it is seen (what is going on in the Church is borne out by evidence) the poor are regarded by influential men of the ecclesiastic institution as a serious danger which threatens the Church.

To conclude, we must confirm that in point of fact what Jesus saw as most serious, most dangerous in human nature was not attachment to money and its consequences but the attachment to power that money procures²⁶. And this, in a specific sense: in the measure that power, transfigured by religion, is converted into “religious pride”. It is what St. Paul expressed with the word *káuchêsis* (and its derivatives). This word indicates the experience in which the human being (most often without realising it) defines and determines his deepest attitude towards God. Because in *káuchêsis*, man reveals clearly *in what he places his confidence* and *on what he bases his life*, and *on what he sets the foundations of his existence*²⁷. In other words, *káuchêsis* expresses where each one places as a last resort his security²⁸.

In this sense, one can and should speak of a “religious” pride, because it is the basic experience, which points out “the ultimate thing” that really determines our lives.

Well, when what really determines the life of a person is his ardent longing and obstinate adherence to his own *security*, his own *superiority* and to *power*, with the concomitant inevitable *disdain* towards the weak, then however much we dress all this up and even mystify this with the cloak of “religion” and even of “service to the Church”, we find ourselves looking at the exact reproduction of what Jesus had to face, since without a doubt, Jesus saw in this attitude the most serious danger to humanity. It is this attitude precisely that gives birth to the *concrete and practical* contempt that these people have towards the weak of this world. That is to say, this exactly is the starting point of the tragedy and death of the poor. Up to this point the relations of *the poor with the Church* are decisive.

5. CONCLUSION

What do the poor ask of the Church? What challenge do they pose for the new millennium? Let us resume what we have been finding out up to now:

— *Firstly, that the Church should not be afraid of them, that she should not overlook them at the time of thinking, deciding, acting, teaching, etc.*

— *That she should give them at least as much attention and as much hearing as she gives to the many powerful people of this world (the rich, wise, those that rule the present order of things...). The same amount, to say the least. Actually she ought to give them much more.*

— *That she should make them not only passive subjects of her attention, but also active ones: that she should set herself on the road to taking them into consideration in her centres of analysis and decision, etc.*

— *That she should not persecute or ill-treat those who opt for the poor (with all the consequences that this brings along) and who try to construct a world less cruel and less unjust towards these poor.*

— *And that being converted to God, she should not place her security more in the ambiguous support of the powers of this world than in the weak support of the poor. And that she should know that, if this creates problems for her, it also created the same for her Founder.*

NOTES

1. Cf. R. Castel, *Les Metamorphoses de la question sociale*, Paris 1995. Cited by J. García Roca, *La globalización entre el ídolo y la promesa: Éxodo n° 39* (1997) 38.
2. From the little we know of the history of the Church, we know that it has been like this. To convince oneself of this, one has only to read the excellent collection of texts that J.I. González Faus has made under the title *Vicarios de Cristo*, Madrid 1991.
3. A good historical and analytical summary of this ecclesiastic teaching can be found in the long study of I. Camacho, *Doctrina social de la Iglesia*, Madrid 1994.
4. *Didaskalía*, II, 58 (ed. Funk pp. 168-170).
5. That it refers to the profound knowledge of the Father and to the revelation that Jesus makes of the Father can be verified by what He said in v. 27, where He uses again precisely the same verb (*apokalypsai*).
6. For this reason the term *nepios* is usually translated by “child” or “little one”. As a matter of fact, it is *nê-epos*, that is to say, he who does not speak. Cf. M. Zerwick, *Analysis Philologica Novi Testamenti Graeci*, pg. 28.
7. And with this, theology convinced itself that it was the “knowledge of God”, not a knowledge of this world.
8. O. Kuss, *Cartas a los Corintios*, Barcelona 1976, 192; cf. W. Sharage, *Der erste Brief an die Korinter*, in *Evangelisch-Katholischer Kommentar zum Neuen Testament*, IV/1, Zurich 1991, 178.
9. For example, the very valuable encyclopaedia, *Sacramentum Mundi* speaks of the “dangers” entailed in this expression. Cf. Vol. V, 483.
10. The ideological differences between Pharisees and Sadducees were four. The Sadducees, in the first place, abided by the written Tora (law) and did not accept later traditions. Secondly, they did not accept faith in the resurrection of the dead. Thirdly, they denied the existence of angels. Fourthly, they affirmed that God exercised no influence over human actions. Cf. E. Schürer, *Historia del pueblo judío en tiempos de Jesús*, vol. II, Madrid 1985, 510-513).
11. It is clear that Jesus got involved in the revolutionary movements of His times, as we are able to verify from His disciples: Simon, who was nicknamed “the zealot” (Luke 6, 15; Acts 1, 13) and Judas who, it appears, belonged to the “sicars” the most violent faction of the revolutionaries. It is said that even Peter and Andrew were linked with such subversive movements. Cf. S. Brandon, *Jesus and the Zealots*, Manchester 1967, which attempted to defend the assumption that Jesus was a Zealot. Clarifications made on this thesis: G. Baumbach, *Zeloten und Sikarier*: ThLZ 90 (1965) 727-740; Id., *Die Zeloten*: Bul. 41 (1968) 2-19; M. Smith, *Zelots and Sikarii. Their origins and relations*: HThR 1 (1971) 1-20.
12. Regarding the Escenios, cf. the recent study of H. Stegemann, *Los esenios, Qumrán, Juan Bautista y Jesús*, Madrid 1996.
13. Jesus admits a publican into His group of disciples (Mathew 9, 9 par), which caused a scandal (Mathew 9, 11 par), since in the culture of those times, to eat with somebody implied showing solidarity with that person. Cf. J. Jeremias, *Jesus als Weltvollender*, Gütersloh 1039, 74-79; O. Hofius, *Jesus Tischgemeinschaft mit den Sündern*, Stuttgart 1967, 11 ss. It was for this reason that Jesus was accused of being a friend of publicans and sinners (Mathew 11,19), since the publicans lived with Him (Luke 18, 10-13) and He did not hesitate to stay in the house of a publican (Luke 10, 2-8). In respect of eating being a sign of solidarity, cf. the excellent study of R. Aguirre, *La mesa compartida, Estudios del N.T. desde las ciencias sociales*. Santander 1004, 17-133.
14. Cf. J.R. Donahue, *Tax Collectors and Sinners: An Attempt at Identification*: The Catholic Biblical Quarterly 33 (1971) 39-61; J.A. Fitzmyer, *El Evangelio de Lucas*, vol. II, Madrid 1987, 330-331.
15. Excellent analysis of this topic, in J. Jeremias, *Jerusalén en tiempos de Jesús*, Madrid 1977, 316 and 322-323.
16. Cf. W. Grundmann, *Los Judíos de Palestina entre el levantamiento de los Macabeos y el fin de la guerra judía*, in J. Leipold and W. Grundmann, *El mundo del nuevo testamento*, vol. I. Madrid 1973, 203.
17. Cf. J. Jeremias, *Jerusalén en tiempos de Jesús*, 131-133.
18. J. Jeremias, o.c. 261. To be more specific, the Pharisees and the Scribes belonged to the class of the subalterns, that

is to say, to the popular classes, separated from the rich by an “enormous abyss”. This was demonstrated in A.J. Saldarini, *Pharisees, Scribes and Sadducees in Palestinian Society*, Edinburgh 1988, 39-45. This author follows in this point the previous classification of G.E. Lenski, *Power and Privilege: A Theory of Social Stratification*, New York 1966.

19. K. Marx, *El Capital*, 1. I, cap. 1, IV, ed. Cartago, Buenos Aires 1973, vol. I, 86-87.

20. Dealing with this matter is the well-known recent study of B.J. Malina, *El mundo del nuevo testamento. Perspectivas desde la antropología cultural*, Estella 1995, especially chapter II, 45-83, with bibliography on pg. 81-83. An important volume edited by D.D. Gilmore, *Honor and Shame in the Unity of the Mediterranean*, American Anthropological Association, Washington (D.C.) 1987. A summary of this approach, in J.J. Pilch and B.J. Malina, *Biblical Social Values and their Meaning*, Massachusetts 1993, 95-104.

21. The description and characteristics of these two categories of people are found in J. Bowker, *Jesus and the Pharisees*, Cambridge 1973, 29-38. Properly speaking, the term *haber* designated a member of the community of the Pharisees, but after the period of the New Testament, it was applied to the doctors who were not ordained. Cf. J. Jeremias, *Jerusalén en tiempos de Jesús*, 267-268.

22. *Toh. 7,4*. Cited by E. Schürer, *Historia del pueblo judío en tiempos de Jesús*, vol. II, Madrid 1985, 505, which adduced numerous examples in this connection. O.c., 503-506.

23. In the theology of the Old Testament, the connection between sin and sickness is the fundamental assumption of the rights of purification. Cf. G. Von Rad, *Teología del Antiguo Testamento*, vol. I, Salamanca 1972, 346. Updated information, regarding this point, with bibliography in J. Scharbert, *Krankheit, II, Altes Testament*, in *Theologische Realenzyklopädie*, vol. 19, Berlin 1990, 680-683. In the New Testament, the relation between sickness and sin is clearly vouched for: John 5,14: 9,2; 1 Cor 11,30; cf. Rom 8,20.

24. Thence, the lists of despised offices (almost all associated with the poor) which frequently entailed the loss of civil and political rights. J. Jeremias offers these lists and analyses them, *Jerusalén en tiempos de Jesús*, 315-323.

25. A very extensively documented analysis, with abundant bibliography, regarding the exclusion in which women lived, in J. Jeremias, *Jerusalén en tiempos de Jesús*, 371-383. To this should be added the data that has been provided by E. Schüssler-Fiorenza, *En memoria de ella*, Bilbao 1989. And the studies quoted by H. Küng, *El Cristianismo. Esencia e historia*, Madrid 1997, 815, note 62.

26. Remember that St. Ignatius, in his *Ejercicios* describes as follows the way the standard of Satan operates: first riches; these lead to “power” and this in turn to “vain honour”. And from there “to all sins”.

27. J. Zmiejewski, *Kauchdomai*, in H. Balz, G. Schneider, *Diccionario Exegético del Nuevo Testamento*, vol. I, Salamanca 1997, 2283.

28. It is about (to quote a fundamental passage) an experience which St. Paul analyses and censures with much vehemence in the second chapter of the letter to the Romans: when man puts his security in his own “religious” behaviour (in the “law”: Rom 2,23), an extremely dangerous sort of person is produced. Because: 1) he considers himself superior to those who do not come from the same class as himself (Rom 2, 17-20), up to the point that he becomes a self-proclaimed judge of others (Rom 2,1). 2) This generates a hardened heart (skletóteta) (Rom 2,5). 3) All this leads to self-deception and incoherence, since believing himself master and guide of others (Rom 2, 19-20), in reality he behaves himself in such a way (Rom 2, 21-23) that everything ends up having people who “because” they act as they do, “curse the name of God” (Rom 2, 24).

QUESTIONNAIRE FOR DISCUSSION

0. Before answering the questions which follow:

— *Go through a second time the data and statistics of the introduction and underline what has made the greatest impression on you.*

— *Do you agree with the affirmation that the most urgent and deepest issue that the Church is faced with is the question of the poor?*

— *Have you reflected on “what place” they occupy?*

— *What influence do the poor have on theology and the life of the Church?*

1. Being or not being on the side of the poor is not a question of having or not having such and such ideas in one's head, rather it is a question of being or not being sensitive to the suffering of the weak.

— *What sentiments have you been feeling while reading the text? Do you believe we think correctly and act in accordance with what we think?*

— *Do you believe we justify our conduct with comments like “we are all poor before God”?*

2. After reading how Jesus treated the groups which the text describes and reading “the worst exclusion is the loss of dignity, the privation of rights”, because the problem of the poor is not exclusively economic.

— *How do you feel Christians should involve themselves in the fight for dignity?*

— *How does the ecclesiastic institution place itself vis-à-vis the political and economic powers? For what rights does she fight?*

3. Conceding a leading role to the poor is something that puts in doubt our much desired security, our feeling of superiority and our bad pretence of all that relates to exclusion and weakness.

— *Do you agree with this formulation?*

— *What feelings does this booklet produce in you when perusing it? Are they feelings of acceptance or protest?*

— *Can we work hand-in-hand with the poor? What things need to be changed?*

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