

BLESSED ARE THE POOR

By JEAN VANIER

MY SIXTEEN YEARS at l'Arche have made me more and more acutely aware of the scandal evoked by a person with a mental handicap, particularly a serious one. It is a scandal for society and often for the family itself. And I am using the word scandal in its etymological sense: a stumbling block which causes one to falter.

Primitive societies killed children born infirm. Aristotle and Plato alluded to this practice. Indeed, can beings incapable of reasoning and of speaking be called human? In some hospitals they are classified as 'vegetables'.

In the October 3, 1980 issue of *Paris-Match*, Professor Minkowski says that in order to prevent the anguish caused to parents, he himself would opt for the elimination of prematurely born children when they have serious mental handicaps.

For a couple, there can be nothing worse than to have a severely handicapped child. Have we the right to submit them to such misfortune? . . . Since society does nothing to prevent accidents during pregnancies or to help the handicapped, it must be understood that psychological survival becomes impossible for a couple whose child is very seriously disabled. For such a child death would have been the natural solution. We must, therefore, assume our responsibilities . . . Let us not be scared by words. Whether it be a question of abortion or euthanasia, I think they are in fact real executions, and this speaks for the very rare but grave decisions we have had to take.

Evidently I cannot agree with this manner of reasoning which, in fact, can be applied to a two-year old child suffering from meningitis, or to the victim of an accident at work. But I understand it. From certain viewpoints it would seem absurd to spend so much human energy and money so that a mentally handicapped child can make minimal progress.

In the home where I live and which is equipped with an occupational workshop, we are seventeen who minister to the needs of ten very severely handicapped persons. None of them will ever

be able to speak or even do anything constructive with their hands. This is folly and scandal in our society where values are measured in terms of productivity and efficiency.

As disciples of Jesus, what is our responsibility when confronted with such a situation? We must not condemn Professor Minkowski or others like him who propose to eliminate the poorest among us. Instead we must welcome the poor they wish to destroy and thus testify to God's love and the dwelling place of the Holy Trinity. They are fully-fledged members of the Mystical Body of Christ. They are our brothers and sisters in Jesus.

Is not the entire gospel a scandal? Jesus upsets all established values.

Woe to you rich, you have your fill.
 Woe to you whom the world speaks well of!
 Blessed are you who are poor . . .
 Blessed are you who hunger . . .
 Blessed are you who weep . . .
 Blessed are you who are rejected and persecuted . . .

The rich, the 'normal', the 'respectable' people are invited to the wedding feast, but they are too busy to come. Whereas the poor and the weak come running!

The last will be first and the first last (Mt 20, 16). He has pulled down the princes from their thrones and exalted the lowly (Lk 1, 52). I bless you, Father, Lord of heaven and of earth, for hiding these things from the learned and the clever and revealing them to mere children (Mt 11, 25).

St Paul emphasizes this folly of the gospel:

The language of the cross may be illogical to those who are not on the way of salvation, but those of us who are on the way see it as God's power to save. As scripture says: 'I shall destroy the wisdom of the wise and bring to nothing all the learning of the learned'.

Where are the philosophers now?

Where are the scribes?

Where are any of our thinkers today?

Do you see now how God has shown up the foolishness of human wisdom? God's foolishness is wiser than human wisdom and God's weakness is stronger than human strength (1 Cor 1, 18-21, 25).

And St Paul continues:

It was to shame the wise that God chose what is foolish by human reckoning, and to shame what is strong that he chose what is weak by human reckoning; those whom the world thinks common and contemptible are the ones God has chosen—those who are nothing at all to show up those who are everything (1 Cor 1, 27-29).

Yes, the person with a serious mental handicap is scandal and folly for human reason, for society, and at times for the family. He is someone to be put aside, to be annihilated perhaps. But for Jesus and the gospel, he becomes a source of life. 'The stone rejected by the builder has proved to be the keystone, a stone to stumble over, a rock to bring men down' (1 Pet 2, 7), says St Peter speaking of Jesus. Can the same not be said of the handicapped person?

At l'Arche we discover that the poor evangelize us. They open our hearts and reveal to us the true image of Jesus and of his mission. In what follows I would like to attest to what the poor bring to us and how they help us heal our own wounds.

The poor, prophet of the heart

By God's grace, through governmental intervention and the help of friends, we have been able to receive many wounded people in our communities of l'Arche throughout the world. They are the lonely, the sad, the hopeless, burdened by mental handicaps of varying degrees. Most of them come from institutions which may have provided care and nourishment, but failed to offer them a warm, family atmosphere, and above all the friendly relationship they needed so badly. It is a privilege to be able to welcome them and to build a community with them.

Little by little we have discovered that, in giving to them, we are the real beneficiaries, for they awaken in us those values of the heart that call forth the best in us: our capacity to love and to commit ourselves *to persons*.

The poor person is prophetic. He cries out. He calls us to change, to relinquish our selfishness and open ourselves to sharing. What does he ask? Like you and me he asks to be recognized as a person, to be loved with a love that is not mere sentimentality but one that is committed, a love that expresses care and understand-

ing; a desire for the other to be at ease in his body and in his entire being, that he progress and develop his latent possibilities. He desires a love that embodies tenderness, trust and hope.

The face of the poor person may be deformed, his body twisted, his intellect dull, but deep within is a heart that hopes. He does not need words; he does not understand them. He needs a reassuring touch, a gentle voice the tone of which conveys to him the message: 'I am happy to be with you; come with me'. Certainly, he will at times need firmness, but if a child or an adolescent knows he is loved, if a trusting relationship has been established, he accepts this firmness. He recognizes it as a hope for life.

The poor need time

If the one who carries a heavy handicap is to rediscover the desire to live, if he is to hope, to have confidence in himself and in others, he needs to find another heart that beats in unison with his. He needs to create a relationship that is authentic, loving and trustworthy. If he does not find such a heart, if he is left alone without friends, with that feeling of being 'good for nothing', cast aside, he becomes captive of his sadness. His life is meaningless, he feels useless. He becomes depressed, refuses to eat, to live. He may become self-destructive, bang his head, scream or cry; or he may shut himself in a prison of silence and isolation.

But if he finds a heart that is open, someone who says to him 'I care for you' and who reveals to him that he is beautiful, lovable and capable, he gradually comes to life. He eats, he smiles; little by little life awakens in him, his body relaxes, his face reflects serene joy, happiness.

The wounded person who is broken by suffering and sickness asks only one thing: a heart that loves him, commits itself to him, hopes in him. But it takes time to build up this trusting relationship. An authentic relationship is one that has withstood the test of time. 'Is it true that I am precious and important in your eyes? Do you want me to grow? If you find someone more interesting than me, will you abandon me? Do you really love me?' Time and love will answer these questions.

When I am assured of being loved, when I can truly count on someone who believes in me, everything changes. Then I have a friend with whom I can exchange and share thoughts and sentiments; we can help each other. Life begins or starts anew. I am

confirmed in my deepest being. I am loved and this means that I am important. I have no need to destroy—whether it be objects, persons or myself. I can build myself, others and the community! That takes time. But where can we find this heart ready to commit itself to the poor, to those totally deprived of everything? That is the question and the challenge.

A very gifted person naturally appeals to our sensitivity, he does or can reward us. The poor person calls and he is very demanding. He may ask for money, he will certainly ask for time, but above all he asks for our heart, our friendship, our love.

The world has neither time nor money to waste on the 'useless', the 'handicapped', the 'idiots'. There are other priorities. And in each of us there is that rich individual who has no time to lose with the 'useless' ones, who refuses the invitation to the marriage feast:

I have just bought a pair of oxen, a piece of land . . .
 I must marry my daughter . . .
 I have things to do, people to see, a book to read or to write,
 things to do . . . things to do . . .
 And I am tired, charity begins with oneself . . .
 Then there is my comfort, my security . . . my opportunities for
 promotion . . .
 Television, cinema, things to do . . . things to do . . .
 And I'm tired.

The poor person awaits an encounter of mingled gratuity and love in which he is recognized as being worthwhile. He envisages a relationship that is absolute. In short, he hopes for a commitment. But we are afraid to love because in loving we commit ourselves to persons, we allow something to die within us. We die to our comfort, our wealth, the use of our time, our leisure moments, our culture, our reputation, our success, and perhaps to our friends. And it is a risk to live with the one who is destitute of everything. It is a risk because it demands a spirit of sacrifice, since he cannot speak or walk or do things by himself, and he is in constant need of our presence. This cry of the marginal person is demanding. And we have no time for him.

It is perhaps easy to have a brief encounter with a wounded person; it can be a beautiful experience. It is relatively easy to accompany him for a few months, or to work with him on a

professional basis for a limited time. But he needs more. He needs someone with whom he can share his joyful moments, but also share his painful ones; someone who is neither sentimental nor overprotective; someone who encourages and stimulates him; someone who is a sign of God's tenderness and of his fidelity throughout the ages. He needs someone to help him recognize his gift, his life's meaning, and who receives him and loves him for what he is.

The poor call on us to change

Jesus looked steadily at the young man and loved him, and he said to him: 'There is one thing you lack. Go and sell everything you own and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me'. But the young man's face fell at these words and he went away sad, for he was a man of great wealth (Mk 10, 21).

The poor person is a prophet. He challenges us to change, to adopt a new style of life. He invites us to live relationship, celebration, sharing and forgiveness. The rich person is fearful, he shuts himself up in his wealth, his isolation, his hyperactivity and his leisure time.

The rich person rejects his poor counterpart because the latter calls him to a relationship of tenderness, a heart to heart; he doubts his ability to respond to this call of the poor. He may be competent, enlightened, intelligent; he may have developed his powers of reasoning and of efficiency, but his heart is underdeveloped, atrophied. Is he perhaps afraid of it?

This heart to heart relationship is neither sentimentality nor a passing emotion, neither is it romanticism nor a sexual experience. It is a deep encounter, a commitment, a sharing, a real concern for the other. It consists of gentleness, of strength, of trust in the other and of recognition of his gifts.

The rich person needs the poor to help him to escape from the prison in which he has enclosed himself. The danger that threatens him is that of self-sufficiency and of becoming a slave to his own security, his knowledge, his power. And the poor come to upset his sense of security. If he allows himself to be intruded upon, then the miracle can happen: The poor person breaks through the prison bars and his eyes penetrate the heart of the rich to awaken it to life. This is an encounter in which the rich discovers his own

heart as it begins to vibrate and to love; he also discovers his fears, his limitations, his need of comfort and security.

If the rich person, his heart touched, allows himself to be influenced by the call of the poor, little by little he discovers a power, a strength hidden deeper than his knowledge and his capacity for action. He discovers the power of his heart created for relationship and for service, a heart which is meant to be a sign of God's love. He discovers the strength of tenderness, of goodness, of patience, of pardon, of joy and of celebration! A source hitherto sealed up begins to burst forth.

It is the same in human maternity and paternity: the mother and father rejoice in the presence of their child; his weakness calls them to commit themselves to him, to be responsible. They carry him, love him, watch over him. But at the same time the child gives them life. He teaches them how to love, to give themselves, to surpass themselves. And the more they give, the more they receive; they are enriched by the child's smile and loving expression. This communion gratifies them. The mother learns to interpret her child's cry. The eyes of her heart, her loving intuition help her understand the message emitted in this cry. She thus learns how to respond to it. The child cannot speak but he needs to be understood. The same holds for the mentally handicapped person who cannot speak. He needs someone near him who will understand his non-verbal language. In order to grow, to develop and be happy, he needs to be understood, he needs to communicate.

In a mysterious way the weak teach the strong how to love, how to be delicate and attentive. Gradually they teach him to be vulnerable, to allow the barriers behind which he hides to fall down. They call forth within him new energies, appealing to what is deepest within him, helping him develop a hearing and a seeing heart.

The new love leaves him insecure. The emergence of a new source over which he has no longer power can be disquieting because he does not know where it can lead. To what extent can he allow himself to be inconvenienced by the poor?

Gradually the rich person becomes poorer; he separates himself from society's values, those of success, of ownership, of power and of security. He may even go to live with the poor, thus definitely abandoning his 'rich' culture. He becomes poor so as to respond to the call of the poor. His poverty and insecurity realign themselves

with that of the poor. They become brothers. Their hearts are mutually awakened, enriched; life flows on.

A heart that is attentive to the weak must be open, welcoming and deeply at peace. If a person is filled with desires, illusions, frustrations, if he thinks only of himself, of his own comfort, if he is agitated or angry, he cannot be present; he cannot hear the cry of the poor; he cannot understand his language. The weak exact from us this peace of heart, this presence. They immediately sense our nervousness, detect our hypocrisy and our lies. They call for an authentic love.

In the likeness of Mary

Mary loved her God, the Word, not only with the faculties of her soul and her will, but also with her whole heart. Her maternal instinct and all the powers and energies that nature gives a woman were at the service of her love for Jesus. She loved him with her whole heart, her mind, and with deep sensitivity. This sensitivity, this heart was permeated by grace because she is the immaculate one, full of grace. All her maternal gestures—nourishing and washing her child, playing with him—were imbued by grace and by prayer. She manifests to the incarnate Word, Son of the Father, the tenderness of the Father. Her maternal heart is at the service of the Father's love.

The person who is severely handicapped—but this can be said of everyone—needs to feel loved from the heart. He cannot accept to be loved 'through duty'. He needs to feel a sensitivity that responds to and harmonizes with his own, he needs to meet another heart that is happy, eager, enlivened in and through his presence. He needs to feel that he brings joy.

In the normal course of events, a mother is loved by her husband and the child is the fruit of their mutual love. Her love for her child springs from the tender relationship of the couple. That is why this love is free, oblatory. The child gives to his mother, he fills her with his tenderness, his love. She rejoices in his presence but her love for him is not self-centered.

Whoever wishes to help a handicapped person is in danger of giving himself in a jealous, possessive manner as a means to self-compensation and egotism, or of loving too little, helping through a sense of 'duty' and expeditiously, and becoming aggressive when

faced with opposition on the part of the handicapped. To love truly, to communicate freedom so that the other may have life, our hearts need to be purified of their deep-rooted selfishness. To love truly presupposes growth over a long period of time.

Left to himself, an individual cannot love a handicapped person gratuitously; his love would risk being possessive. Love for a weak person can only spring from a fulfilled heart. This is why he needs a family or a community where true love exists among the members. But still more he needs a heart that is formed and nourished by God's love, a heart that has discovered the hearts of Jesus and Mary, one that has experienced the tenderness of God's love. Only then can he love gratuitously and tenderly.

I do not believe that a heart can love truly and with all the sensitivity that this implies, without the presence of the Holy Spirit. It is he who transforms the emotions or the sentiments into loving energy composed of total attentiveness, of strength, of delicacy, of gratuitousness and of commitment.

Is there not sometimes a danger for certain disciples of Jesus, those who have chosen celibacy, to be afraid of affection and of a relationship with a wounded person? It is as if the heart were impure, and loving someone were tantamount to taking back something from Jesus to whom we have given all. Certainly the danger of sentimentality and self-seeking exists, but does not the gift of the Holy Spirit come to purify and to deepen our affections? Jesus is the master of love; it is he who teaches us to love truly. And in this apprenticeship the handicapped person has his primordial role. He touches the very depths of our hearts; he reveals and inspires love. Jesus uses him.

We need to be guided in this revelation of love. Our hearts lay snares for us. We can quickly fall into illusion. Growth in love is a long process and we need someone to help us discern clearly the movements of our own heart.

We must pray God to give us this gift of compassion, a sensitivity that vibrates with the sensitivity of another and encourages us to give ourselves totally as gift. May he come to change our heart of stone into a heart of flesh!

Mary, the silent and compassionate mother, has a predilection for the poorest. She is close to them. Is it not the characteristic of a mother to love the weakest with special tenderness? Is the Church not called to resemble Mary, to have a love for the poorest and the weakest, opening its members' hearts to welcome them?

Jesus and the poor

Jesus came to our earth to live with poor men and women, and he asks us his disciples to follow his example, to seek out the poor, to allow ourselves to be formed by them, to give them our heart. We then receive a precious gift: the love of the poor man's heart, a reflection of the heart of the poor man Jesus; and we are fulfilled.

In becoming presence, in living a relationship with the poor, we discover the contemplative dimension of love: how Jesus is hidden in the heart of the weak; how the face of the poor is the reflection of the face of Jesus.

Jesus is silent, hidden in the Eucharist. In order to hear his call: 'Come, follow me', we must be attentive. The poor too are often silent, hidden far from the crowd and society, in mental hospitals and institutions. We must be attentive if we are to hear his call: 'Come live with me'. If we take the time to listen to him, Jesus touches our hearts. He calls us to a commitment, to a relationship of tenderness and of fidelity. The poor likewise call us to a commitment and to a relationship of tenderness and of fidelity.

'In so far as you did this to one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did it to me' (Mt 25, 40). He then took a little child, set him in front of the twelve, put his arms around him and said to them: 'Anyone who welcomes one of these little children in my name, welcomes me; and anyone who welcomes me welcomes not me but the One who sent me' (Mk 9, 36-37).

Let us hope and pray that many places, many oases will appear in the Church where the poorest among us can be welcomed; where they can live in a family atmosphere, and where, through gestures of tenderness, they can discover the tenderness of the Father for them, and that through the heart of Jesus's disciples, they may discover the very heart of God.

NOTE

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