

Gilles Anouil

THE
POOR
are the
Church



*A Conversation
with
Fr. Joseph
Wresinski,
Founder of
the **Fourth
World
Movement***

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Preface to the English Edition

Americans have typically thought of poverty in two distinct ways. Most commonly, poverty has been diagnosed as some type of deficiency at the individual or family level—a deficiency in income or wealth, a deficiency in skills or education, or simply a general lack of resources. Persons on the Right, in particular, have often argued that the poor are so because they are deficient in moral rectitude. These different diagnoses imply different policies for ameliorating the situation of the poor—income transfers, job training and educational programs, or punishment for deviant behavior. However, as different as these diagnoses are, they share a common perspective. They all see the problem of poverty as existing in specific individuals or in families. Individuals and families are poor because they have specific characteristics that cause them to fail in their pursuit of social and economic success.

A more radical position espoused by the Left has been that poverty is structural. Individuals are poor because they are oppressed by those in power. In the classic Marxist perspective, the poor provide the surplus labor that is necessary for capitalism to function. In the case of blacks and other minorities, they are disproportionately poor because of racism and discrimination. In sharp contrast to the deficiency perspective, poverty exists not in the individual, but as a consequence of an inegalitarian economy and social system.

Although the deficit and the structural understandings of poverty are quite different, they both see poverty and the poor as problems that are “out there.” The question *The Poor Are the Church* asks is whether these two understandings, either separately or together, are adequate for fully grasping the problem of poverty. In the interviews with Gilles Anouil contained in this book, Father Joseph Wresinski, the founder of the Fourth World Movement, emphatically states that the answer is no.

The Poor Are the Church is a very Christian and specifically Catholic book. It tells us that we can only appreciate Christ if we fully understand him in

terms of his decision to live as one of the poor. In declaring that the poor are the Church, Wresinski tells us that whenever the Church is understood as separate from the poor, it is no longer truly the Church. Thus, our alienation from God stems directly from our failure to be in communion with the poor—to share in their suffering, to understand that their plight is ours, or more basically, to understand that the poor are “us.” God is always with the poor. If we fail to be united with the poor, then we fail in our relationship with God.

What does this all mean for a Jew like myself or even more generally to a nonbeliever? Is this only a book for Catholics? In a *Boston Globe* column (April 10, 2001), renowned author and former Catholic priest James Carroll talks about the currently popular idea of compassion in ways that are quite consistent with Wresinski’s thinking. Carroll’s message is to individuals of all faiths. He points out that compassion means to suffer with. It is distinct from pity. Pity is experienced at a distance and is offered “from above.” To pity the poor is to see them as lamentable and without full dignity. Pity divides the world into rescuers and victims; in doing so it maintains the inherent inequality between the two. Pity is often more beneficial to the one who offers it than to the one who receives it.

Carroll argues that compassion involves suffering with the poor on equal terms. Furthermore, it implies that changes must take place in our partnership with the poor; that what should determine the extent of change is not what we are capable of or willing to give, but rather what the poor require. When we are compassionate, we put ourselves in a position of equality with the poor. In doing so, we understand that they and we are, to use a term from political philosophy, within the same moral sphere. This is what I take to be the core message of *The Poor Are the Church*. When we see ourselves and the poor as living distinct lives, as existing within separate moral spheres, it is our moral perspective that is flawed.

How does our failure to understand that the poor are “us,” a failure of true compassion, matter? Compassion is critical if we are to be in correct relation to the poor. If we are only concerned with poverty in terms of attempting to improve the poor’s deficiencies (on whatever level), we seriously risk seeing ourselves as their superiors. We are the givers, they are the takers. We engage in noblesse oblige. In helping the poor we assert our own moral worth, while potentially depreciating the moral dignity of those whom we intend to help.

If we address poverty as a problem of structural inequity or political injustice, there is the risk that we believe that others, but not ourselves, are responsible for the situation of the poor. Moral hubris becomes a distinct

possibility. This is one of the two key problems that Wresinski sees in leftist revolutionary movements. Wresinski is quick to point out that God is equally present in the rich and the poor. The moral status of the poor should not be exalted by demonizing the rich. Wresinski also believes that revolutions almost never truly aid the poor. Rather, they benefit the revolutionaries.

If one merely skims through *The Poor Are the Church*, it is easy to believe that the poor Wresinski speaks of—those in extreme poverty, the social excluded—are both impoverished and docile. They live simple lives of misery. Like wretched, abandoned puppies, they are individuals for whom we should feel sympathy. This is a serious misunderstanding of Wresinski! At several points Wresinski notes that he ended up in fist fights with the very poor with whom he worked and lived. Domestic abuse among the poor is a widespread problem. These are individuals who live profoundly difficult lives and who, as a result, can be very difficult to live with.

In American terms, Wresinski’s poor, at least by some definitions, is what has come to be known as the underclass. After the uproar caused by the Moynihan Report in 1965 and its concern with the increasing number of African-American children being born out of wedlock, it became politically incorrect for academics on the Left to discuss, much less analyze, behavioral issues among the poor. Any attempt to do so was seen as “blaming the victim.”

The publication of William Julius Wilson’s *The Truly Disadvantaged* in 1987, changed this. Wilson rebuked the attack on the Moynihan Report and its concern with single parent households. Whereas Moynihan was concerned that the percentage of African-American children being born out of wedlock was approaching thirty percent, two decades later it was nearly seventy percent. Wilson argued that poverty was not simply a matter of economic impoverishment but also a problem of out-of-wedlock childbearing, long-term unemployment, welfare dependency, and crime. In short, deviant behavior was an issue. The term “underclass,” however, is currently in disrepute. It is now generally seen as a derogatory term that demonizes the poor (for example, see Michael Katz’s *The Underclass Controversy*). In terms of the above discussion, the term underclass is viewed as implying that the poor are morally deficient and thus lack full human dignity. In Katz’s terms, it results in our seeing the poor as “the other.”

Certainly one of the most powerful accomplishments of Fr. Wresinski is his ability to recognize how problematic the lives of those in extreme poverty are, his so-called Fourth World, while simultaneously asserting their full human dignity. In places he even suggests that the dignity of the poor surpasses our own.

How can we recognize how problematic the lives of Fourth World persons are without seeing them as "the other"? We do this by seeing ourselves as one with the poor. For Fr. Wresinski and so many Fourth World workers, this has meant living with and being one of the poor. The poor person is like that difficult and constantly disruptive family member who has never succeeded in life. It is that son or daughter, brother or sister or parent, whom the family is always tempted to disown. However, if we truly understand that this individual is a member of our family, then we know that we are obligated to accept him or her as such. Wresinski's argument, although he does not specifically use this analogy, is that we have, in fact, disowned the poor. For our own moral integrity we need to reown them and allow them to own us.

Wresinski's argument is that of an iconoclast. He suggests that as long as we see the poor as people "out there"—either as a result of some form of deficiency or as the result of structural oppression by others—we can never truly deal with those in extreme poverty, the Fourth World. Only by understanding that those in the Fourth World are our moral equals and by embracing them as full members of society—neighbors, friends—can we possibly begin to deal with the problem of extreme poverty. This is a radical proposal. It suggests that giving charity, paying higher taxes, voting correctly, and political advocacy are not nearly enough. It is only by fundamentally changing our relationship to the poor that true change will be possible.

Wresinski's position is also philosophically radical. It is a rejection of the traditional enlightenment/liberal conception of the self as the wholly atomistic individual. Seen from this latter perspective the poor are unsuccessful individuals (or families), perhaps because of their own deficiencies or because of the unjust actions of others. In either case, poverty is reduced by changing their situation.

In Wresinski's analysis poverty represents the failure of society. The poor are simply (and tragically) the ones forced to bear most directly the costs of this failure. In important respects, Wresinski's analysis rests on a communitarian theory of poverty. Communitarianism, in contrast to traditional philosophical liberalism, defines the self not as an autonomous entity but by the nexus of relations in which an individual is embedded. As a result, individuals are poor not because of their particular circumstances but because of their relation, or lack thereof, to others in society. Those in extreme poverty, the socially excluded, are such because they are related to as "the other."

Let me make this more concrete by describing a specific example. Former neo-conservative economist Glenn Loury often talks about the tragedy of so

many young black males in America who have been given extended terms in jail for minor drug offenses. Loury does not want to simply let all these individuals out of jail. They have committed crimes. What he is appalled by is society's comfort with the status quo. He argues that if these were the children of white middle-class families, these high levels of incarceration would never be tolerated. We, as a society, would search for alternative solutions. It is precisely because we see young black youth as "the other" that it is politically acceptable to deal with their involvement in drugs through imprisonment.

Wresinski understands the situation of the poor from a deeply Catholic perspective. His message, however, is not just for Catholics but for us all. He calls us to understand poverty in a profoundly different way, not just as destitution and oppression but as social isolation. This isolation is created by us all to the degree that we live apart from the poor and fail to understand that their fate is ours.

In Judaism, those in extreme poverty, the socially isolated, are described as "the stranger." The great Jewish medieval sage Maimonides, in the Mishneh Torah, his systematic presentation of Jewish law, states (Law of Virtue 6:3-4):

To love the stranger who comes to take refuge beneath the wings of the Shekinah (God) is the fulfillment of two positive precepts. First, because he is included among neighbors (whom we are committed to love). And secondly, because he is a stranger, and the Torah said, "Love you therefore the stranger" (Deut 10:19). God charged (us) concerning the love of the stranger, even as He charged us concerning love of Himself, as it is said, "You shall love the Lord our God" (ibid. 6:5). The Holy One, blessed be He, loves strangers, as it is said, "And He loves the stranger" (ibid. 10:18).

It would seem that Wresinski and Maimonides are in strong agreement about what God requires of us with respect to the poor.

—Christopher Winship,
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