

(English translation)

Rocca di Papa, 5 February 1979

Jesus in Those Who Suffer (Part II)*Jesus in the needy in the writings of the Saints*

In one of his sayings, the Curé of Ars shows how it is almost natural for him to see things in a supernatural way, therefore in the true way.

*"Frequently we believe we are giving assistance to a poor person, and in reality it turns out to be our Lord Jesus Christ."*¹

And he cleared up a doubt that all of us can have when it comes to helping someone unknown: *"There are those who say: 'Oh, he will make bad use of it'. Let him do what he wants with it. The poor person will be judged on what use he or she made of your gift, and you will be judged on the basis of the gift you could have given and did not give."*²

The fact is that the saints have always been great experts in loving those who suffer and leaders in establishing all sorts of initiatives to help them. But above all human beings with hearts of flesh: they say that St. Francis "seemed to have a mother's heart."³ The saints are persons who have felt the sufferings of the poor and the needy as their own, and have loved Christ in them to such an extent that he did not wait for the next life in order to show himself to them.

We read of Catherine of Siena: *"She was accosted by a beggar, who asked her, for the love of God, to help him in his need. Not having anything to give him, she told him to wait until she had got home. But the beggar persisted: 'If you have anything to give me, give it to me now, because the truth is I'm desperate.'"*

Not wishing to send him away disappointed, she broke the thread of a little silver cross and gave it to him. As soon as the beggar had been given it he went off perfectly content without asking anyone else for anything.

During the night, while the virgin of the Lord, Catherine, was as usual at prayer, the Saviour of the world appeared to her holding this cross, now adorned with precious stones, in his hand.

*"Daughter," he said, "do you recognize this cross?" "I certainly do," replied Catherine, "but when it was mine it was not so beautiful." Said the Lord, "I promise you that I will present it to you, just as it is now, in the presence of the angels and human beings on Judgment Day."*⁴

Another day the Lord appeared to her in the likeness of a young man half-naked. Catherine said to him, 'Wait here for me a little while, while I go back into that chapel, and then I will give you clothing.' Once inside the chapel, she carefully and modestly pulled down the sleeveless tunic that she wore under her outer tunic and gave it to the poor beggar. He no sooner accepted it than he made another request: 'Lady, now that you have supplied me with a woollen garment, will you give me some linen clothes too?' Catherine said: 'Follow me.' Entering her home, she went into the room where the linen clothes belonging to her father and brothers were kept, took out a shirt and a pair of trousers and with a smile offered them to the beggar. But he said, 'Lady, what use is this tunic to me without sleeves?' Whereupon Catherine, not in the least degree put out by this, set off on a careful search of the house. She happened to see the serving woman's dress hanging from a pole, so she quickly unstitched the sleeves, and gave them to the beggar.

¹ Curate of Ars, "Pensieri", in "Scritti scelti", Rome 1975, p.83.

² Curate of Ars, "Ibid.", p.83.

³ "Leggenda minore" di S. Bonaventura da Bagnoregio, lez.7, in "Fonti francescane", Bologna 1977, p. 1035.

⁴ Cf. "S. Caterina da Siena", vita scritta dal B. Raimondo da Capua, Siena 1952, p. 180-181.

He then said, 'Look, lady, you have given me a new set of clothing, but I have a friend and he too is in great need of clothing.' But Catherine remembered that everyone in the house except her father was upset at her continual almsgiving at her continual almsgiving. So she was in two minds as to what to do, whether to give the poor fellow her one remaining piece of clothing or not. Charity suggested she should, but maidenly modesty said no.

So she said to the beggar, 'If it were lawful for me to go about without a tunic I would give you this one gladly; but I am not allowed to do so.' The other replied, 'I know you would be very pleased to give me all you could. Farewell.'

During the night, while she was praying, there appeared to her the Saviour of the world, in the likeness of this beggar, holding in his hand the tunic that Catherine had given him, now decked out with pearls and brilliant gems; and He said to her, 'Most beloved daughter, do you recognize this tunic?' When she answered that she did, but that she had not given it to Him in that rich state, the Lord went on, 'Yesterday, you clothed me; now I will give you from my holy Body a piece of clothing that will certainly be invisible to the eyes of men but which you nevertheless will be able to perceive, and by means of it your soul and body will be protected against all danger of cold until the time comes for you to be clothed with glory and honour in the presence of the saints and angels.' And immediately with His most holy hands, He drew forth from the wound in His side a garment the colour of blood, and putting it upon her, He said, 'I give you this garment with all its powers for the rest of your life on earth, as a sign and token of the garment of glory with which at the appropriate time you will be clothed in heaven' as a sign and token of the garment of glory with which at the appropriate time you will be clothed in heaven' With this the vision vanished.

The holy virgin from that time forward never wore any more clothes in winter than she did in summer."⁵

St. Vincent de Paul's charism of love for the poor and for all those in need continues to shine like a beacon down through the centuries. When he explained their rule to the first Daughters of Charity, he went so far as to say: *"You should know, my daughters, that when you set aside your prayers or the holy Mass in order to serve the poor you will not be losing anything, because serving the poor means going to visit God, and in the poor person you ought to see God."*⁶

But let us now look at another great saint of the poor, who made himself Poverty for love of Christ. We all know him: Francis of Assisi. He had such a deep sense of universal brotherhood - it is certainly not by chance that he is referred to as the saint most similar to Christ -, that he could not conceive of a world with social inequalities, in which some have more and some have less.

"One day while he was riding on horseback through the plain that lies below the town of Assisi, he came upon a leper. This unforeseen encounter struck him with horror, because he was also human. But he recalled his resolution... to become a knight of Christ. He... ran to kiss the man. When the leper put out his hand as if to receive some alms, Francis gave him money and a kiss.

Immediately mounting his horse, Francis looked all around; but although the open plain stretched clear in all directions, he could not see the leper anywhere.

*Filled with wonder and joy, he began devoutly to sing God's praises...."*⁷

When Francis *"met the poor he not only generously gave them even the necessities of life that had been given to him, but he believed that these should be given them as if theirs by right."*

⁵ Cf. "ibid." p. 182-185.

⁶ M. Auclair, "La parola a S. Vincenzo De'Paoli", Rome 1971; p. 132.

⁷ "Leggenda maggiore" di S. Bonaventura da Bagnoregio, 1,5, in "Fonti francescane", Bologna 1977, p. 842.

It happened once that a poor man met him... when because of an illness [Francis] was wearing a short mantle over his habit. When his kind eye observed the man's misery, he said to his companion: 'We should return this mantle to this poor man because it is his. For we got it on loan until we should find someone poorer than ourselves.'

But his companion, considering the need of his devoted father, obstinately refused, lest Francis provide for another by neglecting himself. But Francis said: 'I believe that the great Almsgiver will charge me with theft if I do not give what I have to one who needs it more.'

Therefore concerning all that was given him to relieve the needs of his body, he was accustomed to ask the permission of the donors to give it away if he should meet someone in greater need. He spared nothing at all, neither mantles, tunics nor books, not even decorations from the altar - all these he gave to the poor when he could...."⁸

Jesus in those who suffer as seen by Pope Paul VI

In Paul VI

How did Pope Paul VI consider the needy? He saw Jesus in them and he says this in a sublime affirmation when, in 1965, he went to visit the prisoners of Rome: *"I love you, not because of some romantic feeling, not because of some compassionate humanitarian impulse, but I truly love you because even now I am discovering in you the image of God, the likeness of Christ...."*

And now I will tell you... a paradox... a truth which doesn't seem true.... The Lord Jesus... has taught us that it is your misfortune, your hurt, your lacerated and faulty humanity which constitutes the very reason for which I have come among you, to love you, to assist you, to console you, and to tell you that you are the image of Christ, that you reproduce the crucified Christ before my eyes.... this is why I have come... to fall on my knees before you...."⁹

When speaking to teachers dedicated to caring for suffering children, Paul VI said: *"They are destined to be in a sort of perpetual adoration, not of Jesus in his real presence under the Eucharistic species, but of what Bossuet called 'the human presence of Jesus Christ in those who suffer.'"¹⁰*

Paul VI himself explained the presence of Jesus in the poor and the suffering in this way: *"We must remember that Jesus is the Son of Man: it was he who named and defined himself this way.... This means that every human being, every human life, has a connection with him. Jesus is involved in a relationship with every creature - so no one is indifferent to Christ -, and therefore he has a relationship with everyone who suffers.... Jesus draws to himself every human suffering; not only because he is the one who has suffered in the highest degree and as a result of the greatest injustice, but also because... he has immense affection and sympathy... for those who suffer."¹¹*

Here are some of the aspects of Jesus in those who suffer.

May we never ever forget that we belong to the Church of the poor, and that the Movement must therefore be the Movement of the poor; all the more so, since this is nothing other than Christianity. At the end of our lives - as we have seen - our final examination will be on this very subject: the so-called "works of mercy."

Pope John Paul I said: *"The catechism translates this [the passage about the last Judgment in Mt 25:31-46] and other words of the Bible into the two lists of the works of mercy, seven corporal and seven spiritual."¹²*

⁸ "Ibid.", p. 902-903.

⁹ (Ai carcerati del carcere "Regina Coeli") "Insegnamenti di Paolo VI", Poliglotta Vaticana, 1965, II, p. 1110.

¹⁰ (Alle educatrici de "La Nostra Famiglia") "Insegnamenti di Paolo VI", Poliglotta Vaticana, 1965, II, p. 1178.

¹¹ (Discorso del Venerdì Santo, dopo la "Via Crucis" al Colosseo) "Insegnamenti di Paolo VI", Poliglotta Vaticana, 1966, III, p. 1219-1220.

¹² Giovanni Paolo I, udienza generale, 27.9.1978, in "Oss. Rom.", 28.9.1978, p.1.

So let us rectify our intentions, and thereby transform every act of love toward every neighbour in need - whether at home, at work, in school, on the street, or anywhere else – into one of the works of mercy. In this way we will open wide the doors of our hearts to all those we find out about each day who are miserable, abandoned, sick, sinners, alienated, rejected, the dregs of society, or whose human rights are trampled on, whether they are in our own cities and countries or in faraway places.

The poor and the Movement

Just as we find the poor around the new-born baby Jesus, just as taking care of the poor was one of the main concerns of the early Christian community, just as the saints have often begun their ascent to God by going out to the poor, similarly, around the first signs of life of our Movement we find the poor.

I was still living at home on Via Gocciadoro when the first focolarine and I began this new adventure. I do not know exactly what it was that impelled us to go out with such zeal to the poor of the city of Trent, and to continue this zealous activity later on in the first focolare. I think it must have been the words of Jesus found in the Gospel, “*Whatever you did to the least you did to me*” (see Mt. 25:40).

I remember the rather long corridor of my house (where I was still living, not the first focolare), rather long corridor of my house, filled with anything that could be of use to the poor and they arrived from Providence, during the war: cases of jam, cans of powdered milk, sacks of flour, clothes, medicine, and firewood.

I remember that we had very little time, because all of us were working or going to school. So at lunch time, as soon as we had finished eating, we would set out, each of us with two suitcases, they were packed and heavy, to visit the three poorest neighbourhoods in the city: Laste, Portella and Androne. It was always a race! It meant climbing dark flights of stairs, old and dangerous, eaten away by time and vermin, into almost total darkness, into desolate situations which pained our young hearts. Having mounted the stairs, we would find a room without light, its poor occupant in bed, generally lacking everything. It was Jesus. We gave whatever we could. We would console him, make promises in the name of Almighty God, and washed him. On one occasion, a focolarina was loving Jesus in a poor woman with all her heart. She remained in the woman’s house for some time, giving it a thorough cleaning, and finally sang her a song dedicated to mothers. Afterwards, she found she had caught an infection which produced open sores all over her face. But immediately she was happy because she was able to be a little bit similar to Jesus forsaken.

Whenever a poor person would come to our homes, we would choose the best tablecloth, the best dishes and tableware. Frequently what we gave him or her to eat consisted of what we had deprived ourselves of at lunch or dinner, by slipping our bread, cheese or whatever under the table when our parents were not looking, and involving our little brothers and sisters in the game as well.

When we went out each of us carried a pocket notebook, and our hearts would jump for joy whenever we met a poor person. We would approach him or her with great love and ask for his or her name and address so that we would be able to love “to the end.”

Yes, for although our immediate concern was certainly to help each individual poor person, from the start we did so with a very precise plan in mind: we wanted to resolve the social problem of the city of Trent.

God did not let us see anything else, almost as if, once it were accomplished, everything would have been solved. And so we focused our efforts on those who lived in the destitute areas of the city, in order to alleviate their condition: first, by providing them with medicine, food, and wood for heat; and, later on, by finding jobs for them.

Quite often episodes occurred in which it was evident that God had intervened to encourage us, and some of these are still recounted today.

In the first focolare on Piazza Cappuccini the work continued just as intensely. We had a huge pot and each day we would make a huge pot of soup which we would then take to the poor in a neighbourhood called San Martino. But the poor people also regarded the focolare as their home, and they would come and eat with us; and at table there would be a poor person, then a focolarina, a poor person, a focolarina, and so on.

Then the war ended, and the poor became better-off; and gradually we began to spread throughout Italy to announce the Gospel we had rediscovered.

But always, wherever the Movement has since spread throughout the world, whenever there has been a need, as in Cameroon or Brazil, or parts of Asia; or whenever the gen have repeated the experience of the first generation, whether the context was similar or not, the poor have always been with us.

Moreover, the Movement as a whole is now experiencing a new springtime as regards going out to assist others, through the New Humanity Movement, that timidly but decisively put itself at the service of society, particularly today's poor: the drug addicts, the alienated, the unemployed, the amoral and the non-believers.

"Die for our own people" is the motto of this operation which re-echoes and relives what Jesus did.

In this way we await the day when Jesus can say to all of us: "I was an outsider and you brought me into your community: I was on drugs and you gave me back true happiness, I was unemployed and you found me a job. I had no standards to live by, and you taught me God's law. I was without God, and you made me rediscover him as Love."

(Text published in *Jesus in Our Brother*, New City London 1982)