



All Together in Dignity

1917-2017 -Celebration of theCentenary of the birth of Wresinski

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Joseph Wresinski's address to members of the ATD International Volunteer Corps from the hospital Foch, Paris, on the 8 February 1988, the day before his heart operation. Wresinski passed away 5 days after this operation, the 14th February 1988 - this text is a 2017 updated translation of the original in French.

On the eve of my operation, even if I go into it with complete confidence, I cannot help thinking. When you are in the situation that I am in now, in the hands of doctors and nurses, you can again better appreciate what the poor experience in their daily lives when they are at the mercy of other people's opinions, or rather they are forced to take into account the judgments and opinions of other people on things that concern their own lives. When you have to depend on everybody and anybody, you have to make yourself small, not get yourself noticed. This is my first thought.

The second thing I would like to say to you, the volunteers, is that we must remain very, very close to families. Above all, we have to remain faithful to our combat for family life, not as a matter of principle, but because the family is our ally. It is the family who will help us achieve the kind of society we want based on human rights.

We must remain very close, especially close, to the most disadvantaged families. I must remind you of this, because we will always be tempted to rely on the most dynamic, courageous and intelligent families. Of course, we have to rely on them, but we cannot let ourselves be drawn in and entrapped by them. We cannot allow them to come between us and the poorest families. We have to see that they also become agents for justice among their brothers and sisters, among their own people. If we are not to be dispersed over a wide range of unrelated projects, we have to keep asking ourselves, "Do our projects help the most disadvantaged families to emerge from their situation and become agents for human rights?"

We should not be afraid to be daring, even if we think, with good reason, that the poor cannot readily undertake what we propose to them. This means we have to move forward in stages. We must know our goal and what means we will use to attain it. If we are to be truly free, free in our society and agents of liberty for others, then we have to impart our culture, the culture in which we live our lives. We have to convey everything we have learned. We must find ways to truly share what we know and invent the means for the families to take this on board. We are not people who only bring ideas and a language. We must bring the fullness of human life and its harmony, sharing not only practical skills but art and poetry as well.

To do this, we have to immerse ourselves in the best of what human beings have achieved, in music, in art. We also have to put people in the midst of nature, to help them love it and see the marvellous harmony of the earth and the skies. If we have a religious faith, we must project the families into the world of the invisible, the infinite, so that they are themselves members not merely of a community or a neighbourhood, but members of the universe and actors of freedom.

This implies that we are really integrated in the world, that we love the world. We cannot introduce the families into today's or tomorrow's world if we are not ourselves part of it. It is not that we are blind to human failings, but we must constantly remind ourselves and each other that every human being deserves to be trusted, as long as we do not have proof to the contrary. We must welcome political discussions and the sharing of ideas, and we must love people who defend what they believe in. Whilst not being sidetracked, we have to share in the hopes of all those who fight for a cause. And we have to remind them constantly that the poorest have a place in their struggles and thinking.

We cannot achieve this without an enormous effort on our part: an effort to know the poorest families, their history, background and origins, and the past and present reality of their daily lives. We must want to share in depth, not just superficially, what the families carry within their hearts. We have tools such as psychology, sociology and economics and we must put them to use. We certainly do not hold the key to all knowledge. But if people are to be free, they have to master the tools that have been used over the years to create a more just and equitable world, a world in which peace is not simply seen as an ideal but as a shared experience of fraternity appreciated and renewed every day.

To understand, we have to hear, listen and write. We are not people who simply read, write, and speak, yet we should write what we learn from the families. We should be people with a voice, in order to involve others in the struggle for justice for the poorest, a struggle for justice in the midst of extreme poverty. And we must read extensively and train ourselves.

Also, we must devote our time to the poorest families. It is normal for workers to take holidays and we should do likewise. We should not be reluctant to take advantage of what others consider necessary in order to rest. Our time, like those in love, is not our own. If we take time for ourselves, it is always to enrich ourselves in ways that will enrich the poorest.

Therefore, we make the poorest known, we train ourselves, we offer our time, and, if we pray, we offer our prayers. It is important that we live in a climate of spirituality. When I speak of spirituality, I am not referring to being part of a specific religion, although it is important to have a belief, if not in a God, then, at least, in humanity. We have a commitment to create a spiritual climate because we are imbued with a common spirit.

This spirit is an awareness of others, an empathy with them, such that the weaker and smaller they are, the greater and more important they become for us. When we speak of spirituality, this leads us back to the religious and to relationships with God. We can call this the pinnacle of spirituality, the highest form. In any case, we have to live spiritually with people. This means a certain way of seeing people and of being with them.

It is similar to our contemplation of God; we try to be silent and to become one with God. Someone once said, "I keep Him informed, He keeps me informed". We have to have the spirituality of our brothers and sisters. That is to say, we go toward a certain way of living with others, that they count for us, that we identify with them, because, like us, they lead the same struggle, encounter the same difficulties, doubts, sorrows, the same hopes and joys.

This is the spirituality I am speaking about. We live this spirituality if we can purify our spirit, if we are able to let go of what is secondary, and hold on to what is essential in ourselves, in others, to what is essential in our struggle. Spirituality also means to have confidence, to trust that fraternity is the basis of all successes in a struggle. If the poor see us really united, that we truly care about one another, then they will be with us.

It is the poor who bring us together. For those who believe, it is Christ who comes closer to us when we become closer to the poor. It is Christ who speaks with us when we speak with the poor, He who feels what we feel, He who bears with the poor the burden of suffering and misery. This is what I mean by spirituality for those who have religious faith.

I think that we can all say that it is the poor who bring us together - the poorest, the ones who suffers most, who are most left out, the most rejected and abandoned. And when we say we are volunteers, it is not simply a way of life that we have accepted or chosen, a way of being at the mercy of the poorest in order to learn from them, often with much bewilderment. We have certainly renounced personal advancement and success, but being a volunteer means much more.

It means that the poor have become our brothers and sisters. Their children are our children. We live in perpetual communion with them. They are present with us and in us. We recognize them; we contemplate them; we consider them to be our teachers. They are our constant preoccupation, pain and anguish. We are haunted by their liberation. This is our spirituality: to be in spirit with the poorest families, to be taken by them, so that everything we do, everything we say, is a chance for them.