

(C.W.B. June 21, 1967)

down from generation to generation. No doubt a few emigrants manage to get away, but the masses remain behind and multiply. What deepens the gloom is the fact that those who do cross the border are usually the more gifted and aggressive, which is one of the reasons why they succeed in achieving a certain degree of economic independence.

This is perhaps an opportune moment to recall the biblical content of the concept of poverty. Is it not true, and also a little surprising at first, to find that the poor enjoy a privileged status in the Bible? Are not the poor, the "Anawim" of the prophets of old, God's very own people, whose most illustrious scion was Christ himself? Perhaps we are only just beginning to glimpse the hidden meaning of Holy Writ. In my view, the fact that God chose the poor to pass on to the faithful his message of salvation seems to be particularly meaningful to us who are gathered together in all the glory of "Man and His World". If the poor are the bearers of great biblical and Christian riches, maybe they are also the bearers of comparable social and human riches for those who are willing to accept them. The Bible teaches us, however, that it is difficult for the wealthy and the powerful to learn the lesson of Christian humility and no doubt the same applies in the field of social psychology.

If the land of poverty is completely unknown territory, how shall we penetrate therein — for, of course, we do want to enter, in order to change its basic parameters? Unfortunately, we must confess our utter ignorance, which maybe is not unmixed with a little pride. If we wish to understand this land and its people, we must gain inside knowledge of the personal and collective experiences which have determined its psychology and its structures. But an experience cannot be learned, it can only be lived. To the extent that we have not ourselves lived the life of poverty, we shall always have difficulty knowing what we are talking about and we run the risk of becoming armchair generals.

THE ESTABLISHED DISORDER

To carry this military metaphor one step further, we might consider marshalling vast armies to invade this land, to reduce it and bend it to our will. This is exactly what we have been doing for years with our bourgeois institutions, such as settlement houses, schools and police, all of which give us the impression of being in control, but not one of which really reaches the heart of the country. We can go further and attempt to win over friends within the conquered country by resorting to welfare policies and to the distribution of subsidies. We may even succeed in raising up puppets who will show the world how broadminded we are. Do we not hold up as examples such poor as have met with success and do we not boast of the basic fairness of our social system? Together, these three approaches give the impression that the country has been pacified and its problems solved, whereas in simple fact nothing has been achieved to change the basic realities. We are left with a socio-politico-economic system which Mounier stigmatized as "established disorder", and which we complacently refer to as the "established order".

At one point, Fr. Ubu is led to exclaim: "We shall not have succeeded in destroying everything, if we fail to destroy even the ruins. I see no way of doing it other than by using them to raise fine well-ordered buildings."

The well-ordered building we have to put up requires a reversal of the classic question: "What can we do for the poor"? We must now ask: "What can the poor do for us?"

Obviously, there can be no question of following certain so-called avant-garde groups who accept poverty as a state of life. "Beatniks" and "hippies" who preach withdrawal from our corrupt society strike me as pathological cases — albeit a social pathology which can be readily understood in present-day North America — rather than as guardians of a sound social philosophy.

No, if I suggested this principle which seems so contrary to our traditional way of thinking, it was merely to incite you to ask yourselves whether the final solution to the problem of poverty should not come from the poor themselves rather than from us. Should we not be humble enough to supply them with the instruments they want, rather than attempt to use instruments of our own choosing in ways which may seem useful and necessary to those of us who are wealthy.

As I have just said, and I repeat it, if personal experience is necessary to solve the problem of poverty, only the poor of to-day have any hope of success. Furthermore, if poverty is a global phenomenon, rather than a piecemeal one, then purely economic or sectorial solutions will surely prove inadequate. If poverty is basically a question of non-participation, then the only way to overcome it is to integrate the poor into our society, and this is something which the poor must do for themselves. At most, we can throw open the gates and build the highway to the new city.

For truly, we hope to build a new city. I should hesitate to call it the City of God, but at least it might be a reflection of the city mentioned in the Apocalypse, as has been suggested by the school of theologians founded by Fr. Montcheuil. According to this theology — which at one time was labelled as Marxist — the building of this new city has a truly Christian and eschatological value. It is henceforth a proper objective for the labours of man as a Christian, rather than as a simple citizen, which opens up new approaches for a Christian humanism which would be something more than social humanism....

LET THE PEOPLES SPEAK

But, I like to tell you that this idea of participation is one of the basic tenets of the Agricultural and Rural Development Act programme. It was our intention that the people concerned should participate in the development plans which are aimed at the poorest areas of rural Canada, and this has been spelled out in the laws which govern the activities of the Department which I head. This is no easy undertaking, I can assure you, and it constitutes a threat to the established order. It would be so much easier to accept the wise counsels contained in the voluminous and esoteric reports produced by the experts and to forget the people concerned altogether.