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WHAT THE PEOPLE WE CALL "HOMELESS" HAVE TAUGHT ME

Intervention of Mgr Bruno M. Duffé

*Secretary of the Dicastery for Promoting Integral Human Development
at the Street Homelessness and Catholic Social Teaching Symposium*

Translated by Christopher Derige Malano

Rome, November 30, 2017

I think I can say, as far as I can go back to my living memory and as a pastor, that the first thing I learned from “homeless” people we meet in our streets - and that we can sometimes find at the door of our institutions - is the determining importance of the gaze. And I would like to suggest, as a first contribution to our reflection, this intuition that has become for me a conviction and a major theological and ethical assertion: all human encounter begins with a look. Every truly human story finds its origin in the gaze.

If I wanted to sketch a phenomenology of gazing, I would ask above all that the gazing - which is obviously much more complex than the simple ability to see, or as we sometimes say, to “come and see.” Gazing operates as an exit from oneself and is therefore part of a movement of “exodus” and coming to the other, in which two are mingled and, to some respect, risk and trust are confused: the risky trust and the risky offer of recognition. In the very movement of looking, and already in the very movement of the eyes, which opens to the encounter of two stories and two memories, there is the demanding and sometimes desperate quest for re-acquaintance. And the gaze participates, in a privileged way, in this first relationship. It precedes even words. It itself and which has to do with our common humanity,

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our co-humanity. The gaze puts into action an exchange. There are many who do not look, who do not have the time nor the desire to look - history is not written first with words or speeches, but from the crossroads of our gaze. And if the word comes, it is from the gaze that the condition is offered.

We traditionally suggest that the first principle of the social teaching of the Church is the fundamental and foundational principle of the dignity of the human person. And we argue that this inalienable and irreducible dignity of the human person has its source in the creative act of God who calls every person to life and who leaves an imprint of the indelible love of the Father.

We could say that human dignity - which forbids the reduction of human beings to the state of objects that we use, that we exploit, that we throw away when they are no longer useful to us - begins and takes form with the gaze of the Father on his child. As Jesus is baptized by John in the waters of the Jordan, a voice is heard: “This is my beloved son, with whom I am well pleased” (Mt 3:17).

Thus human dignity finds its source, its origin, in God’s gaze. This first glance that Christ teaches us, in his way of looking at those whom he meets on his way, teaches us that every person carries in

themselves, at the very heart of their distress and poverty, a nobility and a promise that transcends poverty and manifest themselves in the inner beauty of the people in the street: their eyes, their faces, their hands and even their smile, this ability to convey “hope against all hope”...

When Jesus walked the streets and the villages and when all those who waited for him for a word of healing came to him, he began with a gaze and with this emotion, this inner movement that is the strength of the tenderness of God in our humanity, our body and our consciousness. He will go so far as to split the crowd to join those who do not see, to touch their eyes and to raise them up so that they, too, become disciples and follow him (Lk 18:35). And in chapter 10 of the Gospel of Mark, we are told that Jesus “looked at the rich man and loved him”, which suggests that the Christic gaze touches the true wealth of a person, which is not reducible to what a person possesses or owns, but to the call to become fully who each person is meant to be. This text is very strong for us because it introduces a tension between the wealth that we do not see and the one that which is seen, and encumbers our freedom. A person’s wealth is not what we can see: it is in the gaze of love where an encounter takes place.

The second thing I learned from people in the street is the place that memory holds for them. In addition to the memory of a singular, personal, family, social history is the memory of an encounter - and, in particular the first encounter we had with them. This memory is sometimes like a way of the cross: the loss of a job, the loss of a spouse or a friend, the loss of housing, the loss of rights and ... the street. It is the Way of the Cross, but it also the path of encounters and of life... Because when it is possible for a person to tell their story, then the story is once again possible. “One day I’ll tell you where I’ve been” (My story is history). Our human history is above all this singular story that I can entrust to someone. Here we come across another principle of the social teaching of the Church: the principle of shared responsibility (or “subsidiarity”). Responsibility means, essentially, “ability to respond”: to respond

to someone, who presupposes that someone is there to listen and receive the narrative of my existence; but also ability to respond to my life in front of someone who offers me the space of listening and consideration. Listening to a story of a man or a woman who experiences social solitude can sometimes seem incoherent and contradictory. Listening is essential because what we listen to, sometimes between two silences - because not everything can be said - sometimes between long silences and sometimes between sobs, what we hear is the story of a crossing, between nights and mornings, a story that is the only human wealth and in which responsibilities are precisely combined. Every actor in the story has a share of responsibility and we are there, sometimes simply, so that actors are named, and we can say “I” and “we”.

But I must add that sometimes the narrative and the responsibilities are so complex and difficult to explain that only silence is necessary. I remember a young Albanian migrant - part of whose family had been massacred in a settling of accounts that involved mafia practices and the ancestral rule of the Kanun (traditional vendetta in Albania). This young man, sometimes a child, sometimes an adult, roamed the streets at night so not to sleep and to escape the constant nightmares. One night we walked silently together in the street. And that paradoxical experience of the street, at night, was the beginning of an opening and a great friendship. Someone had walked with him, in the street, at night. And since then we have this “good in common” that became the street at night. For there is no other common good than to share the places of our co-humanity. This is true in the street, in emergency rooms, in a hospital room or in a prison cell.

A third thing that “homeless people” have taught me is that human solidarity is the experience of a mutual exchange. In the neighborhood where I lived in France, there were two women, both of whom sat at the two corners of the square. One was a young, very young, Roma from Romania. The other was a much older woman who came from a country in Eastern Europe. I knew that

both slept outside or in squats. We mentioned more than once some possibilities of help, care, assistance. And one time when I had knelt down and talked to one of the women, she asked me, "But how are you?" Without consulting each other (they did not speak the same language), the older woman asked me about my family. I understood then that we had entered a new form of solidarity and reciprocity. And in doing so, we moved from a helping relationship to a relationship of mutuality. The consequence of this evolution is that I really felt the need for this daily exchange that no longer consisted of wanting to change things, but to share with each other. It is also how I joined the family of the younger woman and we celebrated Christmas in their shack at the edge of a periphery boulevard. The phrase "I need you" could then be spoken by one or the other. This "conversion" was not imposed; it came in the exchange and recognition that does not claim to solve all problems (and there are still many problems) but which opens to an exchange that humanizes, even rehumanizes, when some say, we were abandoned by the community, those whom we love, "and even by God".

So it is with this man whom I remember having offered a coffee on a wintry day. He simply said to me: "One day it will be me who will give you coffee." I saw the importance of telling him that this coffee would be important to me. I gave my consent. Now the phrase has become like a password: "Next time, I'll give you a coffee." It does not matter when! Sharing this coffee is a rite of hope, and even more so, a hopeful expectation. One day, a coffee, mutual recognition, like a party.

In the social doctrine of the Church - or the inspired social teaching of the Church - we go from dignity, the first principle that reminds us of the creative act of God the Father, and the call addressed to every person to participate in creation, to solidarity, the ultimate principle that

reminds us of the communion to which we are called by Christ, the first born of the dead, He who walked our streets and our paths and who has given everything to everyone: "Take this, all of you, and eat of it: for this is my body which will be given up for you".

This social presence is therefore a constant appeal to live the experience of the inner movement, the compassion that is, strictly speaking, the shared Passion: Passion of Christ and passion of the forsaken person. The street is both the place of solitude and the place of encounter. Do we even have time and the opportunity for our gazes to cross? The Fathers of the Church from the third century, Chrysostom or Basil, warned us: "Do not turn your gaze away from the one who is your own flesh."

It is crucial to consider the two sources that are the Word of God, transmitted in the Gospels and the meeting of the person who touches us, physically and spiritually. Sometimes this touch destabilizes us, admittedly, when

the person is insistent. How can this presence be a co-presence or an encounter? The street is also a path. How to offer something other than help - which is undoubtedly necessary - a consideration. I know now that this encounter changes our lives. It keeps us awake at night. And we, ourselves, discover that we walk differently, in the street, at night.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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