



## Pastoral Resource



“Stretch forth your hand to the poor”. This year Pope Francis uses the words from the book of Sirach to shed light on the great story of poverty that envelopes entire nations. The pandemic that the world is experiencing has brought to light a poverty that many had forgotten: *fragility*. By definition the poor are fragile, because they lack what is necessary and their existence depends on the generosity and solidarity of others. Paradoxical as it may seem, Covid has made it possible for us to discover that we are all weak and dependent on others. No one is excluded from this condition. The great of the earth, the powerful of the world and the man on the street are all on the same level. The facemask can be a first line of defense, but the virus creeps in regardless of one’s good intentions. We cannot save ourselves alone, but only together. The images are still fresh in our eyes of the generosity of so many people who really gave their lives to help those in need. Some even called them “heroes”, as so many people are no longer used to seeing acts of daily life where commitment and generosity should be normal and everyone’s traveling companions.

The outstretched hand can never be just one way. Whoever extends his hand must be sure that it is met by another hand. Help is reciprocal. Nor should it make a difference whose hand is held out first. Everyone has a need and everyone receives something: whoever extends it must be able to count on solidarity and whoever helps must be responsible. Weakness and fragility have different faces, but the face of Jesus Christ is imprinted on each one, asking to be recognized. We cannot turn our gaze elsewhere, as we would be betraying ourselves because we would become even weaker. Closed in on ourselves, we look for the defenses that no one can guarantee because they exist only in recognizing the importance of the other. Personal fragility is overcome with the strength of the community.

Therefore, this year the *World Day of the Poor* enters more directly into each of our homes. The awareness of the fragility experienced in the months of lockdown helps us rediscover the need of those who, on a daily basis, live next to us and carry permanently imprinted on their bodies what

we have experienced for only a few days. We cannot forget. Pope Francis' *Message* helps a lot in this sense because it brings to the fore the concreteness of the gestures that enriched the poverty of those moments. "The outstretched hands of physicians who cared about each patient and tried to find the right cure. The outstretched hands of nurses who worked overtime, for hours on end to look after the sick. The outstretched hands of administrators who procured the means to save as many lives as possible. The outstretched hands of pharmacists who at personal risk responded to people's pressing needs. The outstretched hands of priests whose hearts broke as they offered a blessing. The outstretched hands of volunteers who helped people living on the streets and those with a home but with nothing to eat. The outstretched hands of men and women who worked to provide essential services and security. We could continue to speak of so many other outstretched hands, all of which make up a great litany of good works. Those hands defied contagion and fear in order to offer support and consolation" (n. 6).

Before this sign of great humanity and responsibility, Pope Francis, nonetheless, contrasts the image of those who continue to keep "their hands in their pockets and to remain unmoved by situations of poverty in which they are often accomplices" (n.9). The list, fortunately shorter and showing that good is always far greater than the greed of a few, also describes scenes of everyday life: "If they stretch out their hands, it is to touch computer keys to transfer sums of money from one part of the world to another, ensuring the wealth of an elite few and the dire poverty of millions and the ruin of entire nations. Some hands are outstretched to accumulate money by the sale of weapons that others, including those of children, use to sow death and poverty. Other hands are outstretched to deal doses of death in dark alleys in order to grow rich and live in luxury and excess, or to quietly pass a bribe for the sake of quick and corrupt gain. Others still, parading a sham respectability, lay down laws which they themselves do not observe" (n. 9). Harsh words, but unfortunately true, that show how much lack of social responsibility is still present in the world today with the consequence of extreme poverty that is growing out of proportion.

The "outstretched hand" is an invitation to take responsibility for making one's own contribution. This is evident in gestures of daily life capable of alleviating the fate of those who live in hardship and lack the dignity of the children of God. Pope Francis is not afraid to identify these people as true saints, "those next door" who simply, without fanfare and publicity, offer genuine witness of Christian love. The massive presence of so many faces of the poor demands that Christians always be at the forefront, and feel the need to know that they lack something essential when a poor person comes before them. "We cannot feel "alright" when any member of the human family is left behind and in the shadows" (n. 4), writes Pope Francis in his *Message*. It is as though he has invited us to make the "restless heart" of Saint Augustine our own. Remain restless until God is found imprinted on the face of the poor.

The poverty of the pandemic has helped to rediscover the need for prayer. It is no small thing. Most likely, this is the result of a dual emotion. On the one hand, fear that grips our days because, as mentioned, we feel weak and fragile. On the other hand, knowing that there is a force that goes beyond ourselves, that dominates the world and continues to keep it alive in His mercy. Beyond emotions that are often fleeting, the need for prayer should be tenaciously held on to. Prayer not only lifts our minds and hearts towards God, but it forces us to look at our brothers' faces. We look to God to ask him to look at us and our brothers and sisters. Prayer is listening to the voice of God who speaks in silence and reaches the heart of every person who places himself before him to give praise and glory above all. Yet, precisely in listening to the relationship with God, prayer becomes a presentation of what man needs. In this space one can discover the closeness of God who never leaves us alone. The time of prayer is transformed into expectation, hope and obedience to his word. That is, we understand what is truly essential, what the joy of living is truly worth, despite trials.

The *World Day of the Poor*, therefore, is not just a sporadic act of generosity, but once again the impetus to enter with greater intensity into our own soul. Solidarity spreads and becomes true charity

because it is moved by prayer that knows how to understand the profound needs of the brother or sister who lives with me in the light of God's presence.

X Rino Fisichella

Download