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Teach us not to be satisfied: the Pope to the socially excluded

“Teach us not to be satisfied”, and “poverty is at the heart of the Gospel, to be lived; slavery is not in the Gospel to be lived, but to be freed from”, were two of the key phrases of Pope Francis’ address to the four thousand people gathered in the Paul VI Hall, in Rome to participate in the Jubilee for Socially Excluded Persons held from 11 to 13 November by the “Brother” Association, chaired by Etienne Villemain. The encounter was also attended by Cardinal Philippe Barbarin, archbishop of Lyon, who greeted the Holy Father on behalf of all those present, some of whom narrated their life experiences.

“Thank you all for coming here to meet up, to meet with me, to pray with me. And, as Cardinal Barbarin said, your hands on my head give me the strength to pursue my mission, in the prayer of the laying of hands. Thank you”, said Francis.

“I have taken note of some of the words of your testimonies, and also the gestures. One thing that Robert said is how as human beings we do not differentiate ourselves from the great of the world: we have our passions and our dreams, that we try to fulfil by small steps. Passion and dream: two works that can help. Passion that, at times, makes us suffer, leads us into traps, internal and external; the passion of illness... the thousand passions. But there is also the passion of going ahead, the good passion, and this good passion leads us to dream. For me, a man or a woman is very poor, but with a poverty different to yours, when he or she loses the capacity to dream, or the capacity to go forward with passion. Do not stop dreaming! The dream of the poor, of the homeless, what is it? I don’t know, but dream. You dreamed of coming to Rome one day, and your dream came true. Dream that the world can change, and this is a seed that is sown in your heart. One of you who spoke at the beginning – Etienne Villemain – recalled some words of mine, that I use often: that poverty is at the heart of the Gospel. Only those who feel they lack something look on high and dream; those who have everything can no longer dream! The people, the simple folk, followed Jesus because they dreamed that He would have healed them, He would have freed them, He would have done them good, and they followed Him and He freed them. Men and women with passions and dreams. And this is the first thing I wanted to say to you. Teach all of us, who have a home, who do not lack food or medicine, teach us not to be satisfied. With your dreams, teach us to dream, starting from the Gospel, where you are, at the heart of the Gospel”.

“There was a second word, that was not said but which was present in the attitude of those who spoke, and in yours, and which came from my heart, when Robert said in his language: ‘Et la vie devient si belle!’ What does it

mean? That life becomes beautiful for us, we succeed in finding the beauty even in the worst situations in which you live. This means dignity: this is the word that came to me. The capacity for finding beauty even in the saddest and most painful things, can belong only to a man or woman with dignity. The poor yes, the destitute no! This is dignity. The same dignity that Jesus had, He Who was born poor, who lived poor; the same dignity that the Word of the Gospel has; the same dignity that is proper to a man or woman who lives from his or her work. The poor yes, the dominated no! The exploited, no. I know that many of you have met people who have wished to exploit your poverty, who wanted to use it; but I also know that this sentiment of seeing that life is beautiful, this sentiment, this dignity has saved you from becoming slaves. Poor yes, slaves no! Poverty is at the heart of the Gospel, to be lived. Slavery is not in the Gospel to be lived, but to be freed from”.

“I know that for each one of you, Robert said, life at times, very often, becomes very difficult. He said this in his own language: ‘La vie a été beaucoup plus difficile que pour moi, pour beaucoup des autres’. For many others we see that life has been more difficult than it has for me; we always find someone poorer than ourselves. And also this gives us dignity: knowing how to stand together, to help each other, knowing how to lend a hand to those who are suffering more than us. The capacity for solidarity is one of the fruits of poverty. When there is great wealth, one forgets solidarity, because one gets used to the fact that nothing is lacking. When poverty leads you at times to suffer, it makes you fraternal, and makes you reach out your hand to those who are living in a situation more difficult than your own. Thank you for this example you give. Teach solidarity to the world”.

“I am struck by Christian’s insistence on the word ‘peace’ in his testimony. A phrase that tells us of his inner peace: ‘J’ai trouvé la paix du Christ que j’ai cherché’. This is the first time he mentions it. And he then speaks of the peace and the joy that he felt when he began to take part in the choir of Nantes. And, at the end, he made an appeal to me. He said to me, ‘Vous qui connaissez le problème de la paix dans le monde, je vous demande de continuer votre action en faveur de la paix’. The greatest poverty is war; it is the poverty that destroys. And hearing this from a man who has suffered material poverty, poverty of health, is an appeal to work for peace. Peace that for us as Christians began in a stable, in a marginalised family; the peace that God wants for each one of His children. And you, starting from your poverty, from your situation, you are and can be builders of peace. Wars are between the rich, to have more, to possess more territory, more power, more money... It is very sad when we arrive at the point of war between the poor, because it is something rare. The poor are, as a result of their very poverty, more inclined to be artisans of peace. Make peace! Create peace! Give an example of peace! We need peace in the world. We need peace in the Church; all the Churches are in need of peace; all religions need to grow in peace, because all religions are messengers of peace, but still need to grow in peace. Help, each one of you in your own religion. That peace that comes from suffering, from the heart, from seeking that harmony that gives you dignity”.

“Thank you for coming to visit me”, the Holy Father repeated. “Thank you for your testimonies. And I am sorry if I may have offended you at times with my words, or by not having said the things I should have said. I ask forgiveness in the name of Christians who do not read the Gospel, finding poverty at its centre. I ask forgiveness for all the times that we Christians, faced with a poor person or a situation of poverty, look the other way. Your forgiveness for men and women of the Church who do not wish to look at you or have not wished to do so, is blessed water for us; it means helping us to return to the belief that at the heart of the Gospel there is poverty as a great message, and that we – Catholics, Christians, everyone – must make a poor Church for the poor; that every man and woman of every religion must see in every poor person the message of God Who is close to us and Who makes Himself poor to accompany us in life. God bless every one of you. I would like to pray with you now. Stay seated, as you are, and I will lead pray”.

The Pope stood and recited the following words: “God , Father of us all, of every one of Your children, I ask You to give us strength, to give us joy, to teach us to dream so as to look ahead, to teach us to be fraternal because we are brothers, and to help us to defend our dignity. You are the Father of every one of us. Bless us, Father. Amen”.
