

# From Here To Where?

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*This conference was prepared by taking into account the requests made to me by the organizers of the Symposium.*

## Introduction

- a) **Only the person who understands himself as being poor can receive the other in his poverty.**

It is difficult to accept the poor without the same heart.

- Dependence on a worldwide level reminds everyone of his/her radical human poverty.

One day I asked myself: why in the Community there can be believers or non-believers, Jews, Muslims, Christians, from various cultures, and it is OK, there is harmony; and, yet elsewhere all this can be a motive of misunderstanding and violence?

I found the answer in the fact that in the Community everyone feels equal; because all have had the experience of, and have recognized, their poverty (dependence) that is, that a man/woman is not sufficient in him/herself (cf. Genesis 3).

Consequently, only a person with a heart of poverty can receive another in his/her poverty.

Indeed, the Father becomes, in Jesus, tender and merciful love only for one who experiences him/herself as poor!

(From the prayer of the workers of the Community in Dialogue):  
“... *Thank you, because by this involvement that you grant us, you make us appreciate ourselves as poor, for every other person who meets us in his/her poverty receives from us the same energy, power, and love.*” The certitude of love is the foundation of Christian hope, and, as Paul VI said to the Vincentian Family, “you are the hope of the poor.”

**b) To favor participation when encountering personal poverties.**

- When I began the experience of the Community in Dialogue, now some 26 years ago, I thought that it would be enough to remove the persons suffering dependence from their own places and from substances (heroin, alcohol, cocaine, etc.). These certainly produced grave physical and psychological damage, besides the expense of interior resources (reduction of the capacity for judgment, reduction of liberty, etc.), and they rendered the persons more and more incapable of living more involved relationships, rather hedonistic ones instead.
- Then, all of a sudden, I realized that, behind the abuse, there was a “person” with his/her own problems and regrets that arose from the fact that he/she found him/herself inadequate in the face of the reality of life: reality that places limits and brings with it fatigue and exertion in responding positively to every real and human situation.

It was thus that we formulated “principles for orientation” for a positive solution to the problem. In this way, it became necessary to activate a process of maturation in the person on a cognitive, relational, and spiritual level.

The urgency of responding to such a situation of the young peoples' unease (too often undervalued), moved through the assumption of the need for education with regard to the person in difficulty, so that he/she would become an active participant in his/her own life. In this way, we began to structure a communitarian experience, by placing the person at the center of the educative activity.

From this point, we had rules, principles, and other educational instruments drawn up, to make them capable of responding positively to their reality, and thus to make them active participants [protagonists], especially in the spiritual dimensions (often turned off), and in relationships, thus healing their lives of great sufferings.

From this point, it became evident that the medical response alone to the problem, though necessary, was not conclusive inasmuch as it did not confront the causes of the distress, but only the psychophysical consequences of substance abuse.

- Along the educational process, the young people reviewed critically their situation of distress and suffering so as not to fall into it once more. At the same time, they became critical not only of their own outdated and inadequate attitudes, but also critical of the larger culture that had determined their distress and malaise.

According to systemic cultural aspects, if one is poor in one way, he/she is even poorer if he/she does not know of what he/she is poor!

For this reason, I came to call the youth escaped from a culture of death, mutilated in transcendence, and illiterate in relationships, to become reminders within society itself.

*Following the introduction,  
I move to answering the questions  
proposed to me about the theme.*

## **“FROM HERE TO WHERE”**

### **1.a) What do we mean today by healthcare and Social Services?**

A few years ago, the World Health Organization (WHO), in its Ottawa Declaration, stated that any health intervention must be done in such a way as to promote the well-being of the person, the happiness, and not simply the absence of illnesses and infirmities. We also are convinced, through our experience, that happiness results from the person's ability to know, choose, and live values: to live freedom, self-confidence, creativity, but also to allow oneself to be attracted by such values as beauty, truth, esteem for the human being, responsibility, etc., values that inhabit freedom and give an appropriate and positive meaning to every human expression.

- It should also be remembered that recent global research (made over 20 years by two American universities in 180 countries, see *The Lancet*) has indicated, among major causes of illness and death, the decline of traditional pathologies (such as tuberculosis and HIV, often linked to a lack of hygiene and nutrition, and a lack of prevention); and the increase in dependencies and psychopathologies. However, while tobacco abuse is tending to decline, narcotic and psychopharmacological drug intake is increasing.
- From all this emerges the importance of the educational and cultural aspect to address the root problem of dependencies globally: the person must be helped to find

the best part of him/herself, the one that makes him/her more honest, sincere, humble, authentic and freer. This brings about a change in how to conceive of the existence that affects at the core the use of substances, whatever they be (opiates, alcohol, psychopharmacological drugs, etc.), so that one learns how to live out the fullness of one's own existence!

- Looking at the situation from an educational perspective, it seems important that health services take into account:
    - a. that proposing treatments with high maintenance doses, for example, methadone, which, instead of reinforcing in the person the necessary awareness to change, further promotes normalizing, medicalizing, and making chronic the person's state of confusion and dependence. Is this not also reinforced by the common idea that drug dependence is a chronic illness, and, therefore, one tends to cure the effects and not respond to the causes of abuse?
    - b. It is also necessary that health services never cease to have the young person recognize his reality and the consequences he is paying in terms of health and wellbeing, compromising social and family relationships. This is why we must not abandon the person in trouble, nor even minimize his/her serious situation with excessive doses of drugs and methadone that, in the long run, will extinguish his/her hope of recovering.
- 1.b) **How can we both GIVE and RECEIVE that which we need to make the relationships among us thrive again, living in communion with others; for example, what can we do for the common good?**
- Many irrational deviations and explosions in young people result from the lack of positive and mature affective

relationships that have not been given to them to experience in the family: a requirement that did not happen in the delicate years of growth. In my experience, I regularly see families capable of often-not-very-mature affective relationships, and especially the inability to provide orientation. The adults frequently are more inclined to please rather than to promote!

- To go beyond emotional dissonances and illiteracy of relationships (often very self-centered and hedonistic) one must help the young person to pass from the agonizing search for well-being (control within him/herself of the egocentric-egoistic sphere), “to make one feel good,” that is, to activate and integrate affectivity into the sphere of values and of gratuitous and positive love.

Therefore, the capacity for mature affection goes hand in hand with the maturation of Love: “... *know that you can always choose to love!*” as a principle of the Community states it.

In Community we say, “*It is good fortune to feel loved, but it is a misfortune not to have learned to love!*” So, not only love, but also educate the other to become capable of mature love.

- The Community favors this ability to mature in gratuitous love, activating relationships characterized:

by listening deeply to the other: listening with the heart!

by the sense of wonder before the other: I am happy that you exist!

by the respect that overcomes every form of manipulation of the other.

The success of this maturation, therefore, is achieved in the Community when the person makes this phrase true: “You come back to life because others have welcomed you, loved you, and esteemed you; but you have life within you when you give back what you were given to live again.”

**1.c) How can what we do... and even who we are... make us care agents (and not only in healthcare terms), so that we can remove the barriers that divide us from the stranger?**

- Can we be specialists or religious without likewise being asked about the responsibility of adults involved in the same questions on the meaning of life and relationships that young people pose with their malaise and escape from reality? Certainly for effective intervention we must not forget that one cannot underestimate their reality of unease and inadequacy, nor the meaning that it poses to every human being.

If, as Donald Winnicott says, “We still will be too poor if we are only healthy,” then in what wealth are the youth and today’s culture especially poor? If one is poor in something, he is even poorer if he does not know in what he is poor!

- “With science but beyond science” means that if it is necessary to care for the person and his neurobiological and psychosocial “functioning,” of his studious nature, it is also necessary to link the “functions” to the “foundation” upon which they stand. What transcends nature is grasped more with amazement than with reason.

Taking care of the functions also means recognizing the “central nucleus,” that remains in “subjectivity” beyond the disharmonies and dysfunctions that require care.

Understanding and deciphering through science the language of the macrocosm, as well as of the microcosm, does not mean incorporating also the foundation on which they are based.

Beyond the noblest work of the human being, which is knowledge, it is necessary to grasp the essence of things, and nothing captures that “core” of being a person as love does. For example, who are more in touch with the essential reality of a human being: those who grasp the somatic traits and recognize what reasonably can be inferred from them, or those who, being endowed with empathetic perception of love, **perceive the best interior and unique reality of it?**

**1.d) How do we stay focused on the poor, embracing the wisdom of the poor person him/herself?**

- The experience of worldwide dependence leads us to a need to recover existentially and culturally the awareness of radical human poverty, which makes us all equal: it is like returning to the primordial experience of the ancestors. Not, therefore, the sufficiency of scientific optimism – a more subtle dependence than substance addiction; but not even religious perfectionism, which risks not leaving presumptuously a place for the action of God in man.

However, everyone comes from the same radically poor human family, all equally poor and in need of a merciful God: to announce it is to say to the other, encountered in his poverty, as God has loved me, in my poverty, so he loves you in yours. Love generates hope! This applies to all people, whatever their religious and cultural membership, whatever their people and nation.



At a conference on “Science and Spirituality, listening to unease, recovery of the mystery,” a question was asked of the head rabbi of Rome, of a representative of the Islamic cultural center of Rome, and of the bishop of our diocese: “What sort of God is there for a man marginalized and in need, for one who experiences loneliness and despair?”

They all (the rabbi, imam, bishop) began from the books (Bible, Qur’an, Gospel) and they seemed to answer almost with the same language: in the face of suffering and distress, God is a tender God, a God of mercy, justice, and goodness.

Christians then recognize that Jesus is the tangible, historical expression of this graced event, of this incredible love of the Father, revealing his tender and radiant face, revealing his goodness and mercy to the poor. “*Evangelizare pauperibus misit me ...*” (Luke 4:18).

- Some in the Community, whatever their race and culture, may have been left, from previous situations, physically and psychologically tested, yet these limits have not prevented them from expressing their positiveness and communicating their best part; indeed, they appear not only serene, but also happy. All this they attribute to “something that has happened inside” them, to feel “something bigger within,” to feel loved! To this, they attribute the energies of beauty, courage, newness, creativity, generosity, and love emanating from them.
- Mounier recalls the need to pass culturally from Descartes’ “*cogito ergo sum*” [I think, therefore, I am] to “*amo ergo sum*” [I love, therefore, I am], with the difference that in

the act of loving the person is grasped not only in his/her existence (*cogito*) but also in his/her existing with fullness! (*amo*).

In implementing the potential and the value of love, therefore, man/woman, along with inexhaustible fullness, also finds the meaning of his/her life!

**1.e) The poor show us their needs. They are the spirit of the Vincentian Charism.**

- Is it possible to talk about marginalization, solitude, failure, destruction, etc., without mentioning Love? It is love for the person, encountered for him/herself, even before his/her need and situation. In fact, I did not meet an addict, an alcoholic, or an HIV positive person; rather, I met Danilo, Claudio, Mario ... who had problems and we wanted to solve them together. This strength in togetherness and mutual attention is to advance each other!

This is how the attention for the most diverse people led us to organize and reorganize ourselves continually to provide the most adequate responses to the needs of individuals, whether they are addicts, alcoholics, gamblers, HIV-infected persons, prisoners, mothers with children, or those destabilized at behavioral and mental level, etc.; as well as thinking about their reintegration into a working life, prevention activities, family reunions, etc. All this is done by respecting the different cultures and religions, such as Christians, Muslims, Jews, and atheists, as well as people of different nations and of different social origin, of all ages and conditions and so that each one, being accepted, respected, and loved for him/herself as a person, finds him/herself within the original nucleus of the same human

dignity that makes us all great and equally in need of each other. In this way, we successfully developed conditions of friendship and solidarity where there was often a reason for division, hate, intolerance, and even war.

This putting the person in the center and accepting him/her in an integral way arises from the fact that it is God himself who has put the person at the center of everything because he/she is at the center of His Heart; Jesus also tells us: “The Father loves me because I give life for my brethren” (cf., John 10:17). So God’s thought or plan is the human being, because he/she is alive, and alive with His Love!

- That is why we find ourselves saying, “What is the greatest reality always to safeguard? It is the person!” Accept the person beyond how he/she appears or says or does, but accept the person for him/herself; welcome the person because he/she lives (or is regaining life): this is because it would be difficult for those in situations of marginalization and deviance to be able to take their lives in hand and give them value, if they do not feel welcomed and loved, if they do not feel their worth, of which it is nice to hear them being responsible for it!

In my experience with Danilo, the Community’s first young man, in seeing him suffering so and destroyed, I would have stripped before him (“take off your sandals” – EG 169). I experienced the fear that my being a priest would burden him with who knows what weights. Instead, I wanted Danilo to feel respected for himself, a respect due every person, and not as a gift from us! It is to recognize that image in him that comes from God: “What you did to one of these little ones, you did it to me” (Matthew 25).

- But no person feels accepted for him/herself (as a person) except by those with the same heart. A French prisoner writes, *"If I go by the road and you offer me your hand and I take that hand and you realize who I am and let go of that hand, do not be surprised if tomorrow another gives me his/her hand and I bite that hand and I bite that hand."* The rise of violence in the prisoner is certainly a problem for him/her, but he/she reveals that the one who refuses the hand also has a problem! With the difference that the prisoner "knows" his reality; the other no, he/she does not recognize it. The first can better him/herself, while the other one is justified; and he/she will never know what this means, *"every person has his/her wounds, and he/she is wounded where he/she has not been loved."*

## **2. The journey to the New Jerusalem**

### **2.a) A Vincentian Vision of Health and Home: The New Jerusalem of the Prophet Isaiah.**

- The initial act of the Community's journey was in the encounter between a person who lived in love received for years who found himself welcoming another person (Danilo) who was asking for welcome and love, asking for respect and help, to receive confidence. The initial act of love consisted in welcoming the other, feeling equal because both were fragile, weak creatures, and for this reason "humble." In such an encounter, there is the one who opens the house and changes his daily schedule, and who presumes courage and confidence that something new and positive still can happen. Love is perceived as mutual delicacy and kindness, as equally humble and open to a desire for good that made hope real in both hearts. Such positive energies of love become intimate concreteness and a possible opening

to a greater Mystery. "To love someone means to say to him/her, 'You will not die!' To love him/her in Christ is to give him/her complete resurrection!"

- Arriving in Peru in 2003, responding to a mother who asked us to help her son the 'drug addict,' I wrote to the first Peruvian young people a message:

*"... Here are the friends who come from Italy, from far away. They answered your call to Jesus... Now you are building together that "Human Experience" to be a "Home" for every person who wants to find it. It is the home of your own interiority, the wounds accepted and respected, the home where everyone can believe that he/she can attain his/her best self, because he/she is loved and looked upon in his/her dignity as a person, which, no situation, however negative, can ever destroy...."*

I also want to recall the words of Mirella, the directress who opened the Peru Center, killed by melanoma; a few minutes before leaving us, with emotion she said to us, "*For me to come to the Community was like going home!*"

And Carlo, a director who recently left us after a painful illness, wrote: "*The Community is love! You experience it from the first day and you continue to experience it all your life because, whatever your path, by then 'Something' has touched you!*"

- A young man long ago told me that he had attempted several times to take his life (with drugs). In response to the question if today he still wanted to die, he revolted and shouted: "No, today I want to live! Now I know what makes me live, and I would be afraid of losing it!"

What is this life then that young people no longer find?

### **3. Challenges / Strategies for this New Paradigm.**

- 1) Assuming the educational task as an urgent need in our society, whose lack produces solitude and the most diverse poverty and degradation, means developing the sense of the other, welcoming and helping him/her to improve (cf., *EG* 170).

Without activating the incentive to improve, the person would remain in a risky state: in life's troubles, he/she could fall back into feeling abandoned, in the dark, in desperation, in degradation!

Today's social and cultural situation is mutilated with transcendence, and we live an illiteracy of relationships. The young people wrote at the entrance to a center, "*We live a culture of well-developed bodies, almost developed minds, and underdeveloped hearts!*"

Saint Vincent said, "*This night I discovered a terrible thing: before saving souls, it is necessary to give poor people a life that can make them aware of having a soul!*" (Attributed to him in the film, *Monsieur Vincent*).

We need to educate to discern among:

- important things and central things;
- love and truth together;
- developing and functioning are not the same as "improving oneself";
- being ourselves in the joy of togetherness!

To "improve" oneself requires an educational aspect: it is possible because man/woman is a transcendent body!

Accompanying with an educational will means bearing some of the burdens of the other, so that the other will learn to bear his/her own burdens: without the will to learn, accompaniment risks just giving assistance (something different, but sometimes necessary).

Thus, there is no true accompaniment without welcoming the person for him/herself, with respect and with confidence.

2) Accompanying by educating toward the encounter with "Which God?"

a) The core of Christian experience is the tender love of the Father revealed in tangible love in Jesus. It is a graced event, unexpected and amazing: "What we have seen and heard and touched, the word of life, we announce to you..." (cf., 1 John 1:1-2); "when we were still in sin, God loved us first" (cf., Romans 5:8). Gratuitous and free love!

- It experiences God and eternal life, if the love that He is becomes "deeds" and concrete action (*creation, incarnation, liberation!*). "The Father loves me because I give my life for my brethren!" (Jesus; cf., John 10:17).
- Where there is the experience of the Father's love, there lives the realization that "something is happening": the rebirth from on high!

N.B. When we can approach others without any self-interest, with the only interest being that the other is good, that he/she freely experiences the Good?!!?

My encounter with Danilo and the fear that my being a priest would burden him with who knows what! "...*I would have stripped of everything before him! ... a due respect.*"

- Therefore, Gratuity is the essence of educating and accompanying into the experience of Christian love!  
“*Only the one who knows he is poor can welcome the other in his poverty.*” It is as if to say to him/her: as the Father loves me, in my poverty, so he loves you in yours!
- The fundamental value of every educational and evangelizing action is the graced event: the Living One wants life for us!
- In addition, the poor are privileged and they also must know this from our attitudes towards them!

## **Conclusion**

### **TO WHERE?**

- 1) The person at the center is the first value that can make any other value exist. There is no honesty unless there is an honest person. There is no Community of charity unless people live love/charity among themselves.
- 2) God the Father has at the center of his heart the poor person. We make the poor the actors in a new history only if we feel humbler and poorer than they do.
- 3) We must listen not only to the needs of the people who are living their poverty, we also have to listen to what they say about us, about our lives and our faith, and let us be challenged by it!
- 4) God always listens to the cry of the poor. We are in the history of the Kingdom, which will have a future only if we work with God who wants to encounter their cry of sorrow. Otherwise, we already experience a history without a future! “The rich he has sent away empty” (Magnificat; Luke 1:53b).

Note: *EG* refers to *Evangeliu gaudium*, 2013 Apostolic Exhortation of Pope Francis on the Proclamation of the Gospel in Today's World.

Translated: John E. Rybolt, CM