

**POWER AND POVERTY:
NOTES ON STATE ACTION
AND THE DUTY OF PUBLIC SERVANTS**

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Abstract: Converting poverty in style is an option in life that represents the prelude in the fight to eradicate material poverty. And it is an indispensable condition in leaders conceiving politics and governance who understood that democracy and rule of law could not be rebuilt without integration by the people of Europe. Contemplating life and the testimony of figures such as Robert Schuman, Alcide de Gasperi, Konrad Adenauer, Giuseppe Dossetti or Giorgio La Pira entails an approach to extreme austerity but also as a political argument for the fullness of the democratic experience.

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*"I am poor..."*¹.

A young lawyer from a humble Italian family on the outskirts of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, a member of parliament in Vienna and afterwards in Rome, imprisoned in the fascist dungeons of Regina Coeli prison where he developed a lung infection weighing on his health, wrote to his fiancée, Francesca, in these terms, with whom he would be married after leaving prison in 1929.

He was Alcide de Gasperi, and in 1945 he became Prime Minister of the Council of Ministers in an Italy materially ruined by the war and morally by the havoc of Mussolini's regime. When he left politics, in 1953, Italy had consolidated as one of the most thriving democracies in the world, being one of the founding nations of the North Atlantic Alliance and the European Coal and Steel Community, and De Gasperi himself was universally hailed as one of the "Fathers of Europe" after his death in 1954 and one of the great statesmen of the 20th century. Poverty, as he understood it, dispossession of all affection for the exercising of the government's responsibility, renouncing any comforts, austerity, were the premise and style in the exercising of his public responsibilities.

De Gasperi had not revoked power, because power was the tool citizens had for their emancipation. One of De Gasperi's peers and colleagues, the Frenchman Marc Sangnier, had defined democracy as "the power of the people for freedom". But De Gasperi had embraced poverty. And praising him at his funeral, one of his successors at Chigi Palace, Aldo Moro, honestly claimed, when contemplating the example of the deceased leader "that the essence of democracy belongs to moral life".

1. POVERTY AS A CONDITION OF STYLE IN DEMOCRATIC CULTURE

Converting poverty in style is an option in life that represents the prelude in the fight to eradicate material poverty, it is an indispensable condition in leaders conceiving politics and governance who understood that democracy and rule of law could not be rebuilt without integration by the people of Europe. Contemplating life and the testimony of figures such as Robert Schuman, Alcide de Gasperi, Konrad Adenauer, Giuseppe Dossetti or Giorgio La Pira entails an approach to extreme austerity, and in many cases to extreme shortage: Schuman travelling on public transport to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, or having lunch in the canteen, Dossetti sharing a flat with Amintore Fanfani, Giuseppe Lazatti and Giorgio La Pira in Rome, barely subsisting on a few Lira gathered from charity, and La Pira wearing some thick woollen hiking shoes, even in the scorching, humid summers of Florence, and living in a humble monastic cell.

Aversion to luxury, pomp and circumstances as testimony, but also as a political argument. And from example, the fullness of the democratic experience. Or, the opposite. In 2004, before the devastating economic and financial crisis and recession that afflicted the Northern Hemisphere for a decade, young Spaniards acknowledged that their distinguishing

1 DE GASPERI, A.: *Cara Francesca. Lettere. A cura di Maria Romana De Gasperi*. Brescia. 2002, p. 37.

mark was consumerism, and not rebelliousness and non-conformity as before². It is very tempting to establish a relationship inspired on the principle of causality between the practice of one style or the other and their consequences on public life.

Europe and democracy only became finally consolidated after the experience of a second Thirty Years' War, which, between 1914 and 1945, also entailed totalitarian brutality in its triple Nazi-Fascist-Stalinist expressions, when the fight against poverty, exclusion, alienation, inequality and lack of justness became the defining rules of action by public powers, in the priority of institutions, the most basic obligations of the servants of a new civilisation project, and subsequently, political action where the weakest, underprivileged, sick and vulnerable became an absolute priority.

In this sense, Giorgio La Pira, the "Saintly Mayor" of Florence, an Italian constituent in 1946, and Mayor between 1951 and 1958, and between 1961 and 1965, said that the ultimate goal of the State was to contribute to free internal and external development of people, sustaining that the problem of drafting a constitutional order was not only technical, but also metaphysical, because it affected the destiny and meaning of the human being:

"A man just as Rousseau and Enlightenment conceived it?" You will have the 1791 constitution.

A man as Hegel conceived him? You will have the Nazi and fascist type totalitarian constitutions.

A man as Marx conceived him? You will have the Soviet 1936 constitution.

A man as a comprehensive Christian vision conceives him? Then I have the project for a future constitution"³.

For the first time in history, poverty was decisively associated with power. And that is also the reason why the two most positive creations in the contemporary political process took place, two creations that transformed history with the ambition of the fullness of the human experience: European construction and consolidation of a broad, generous, integrating democracy at the service and in line with human dignity and its greatness. The depth of Christian conviction by the leaders who headed up the re-founding of the Rule of Law in the historical project called Europe, was undoubtedly an intrinsic part of that extraordinary period in history. But its principles, although Christian, were actually universal, and were shared by their adversaries in the war, but aware of the democratic commitment and brothers in civic friendship, from other political traditions and other convictions and beliefs, united in delimiting and achieving the goals⁴.

Because it was not about public power looking after political and economic welfare in a restricted sense, but rather human political and economic welfare, i.e. comprehensive,

2 GONZÁLEZ-ANLEO, J.: "El cambio de la sociedad puritana a la sociedad de consumo". *Corintios XIII. Revista de teología y pastoral de la caridad* n° 109. Modelo de vida: consumo, consumismo y caridad, pp. 57-88. Madrid. January-March 2004, p. 58.

3 LA PIRA, G.: *Examen de conciencia frente a la Constituyente*. Buenos Aires. 1957, pp. 51-52.

4 LA PIRA, G.: *Para una arquitectura cristiana del Estado*. Buenos Aires. 1955, pp. 214 and following.

or also in the words of Giorgio La Pira, political and economic welfare linked to the most disinterested and ambitious cultural, moral and religious concerns, “which give man and society true perfection and essential values”. Neither was it about aspiring towards a model of alleged civilisation, where, as Emmanuel Mounier said “order is a rational claim and happiness is the easy satisfying of needs”⁵. Order and happiness were conceived as the fraternal expression of a new model of society, based on agreement rather than confrontation.

Simplicity, humility, accessibility, responsibility and the duty to set an example shaped a political culture and style that European citizens felt strongly identified with, right from the start. The civility of political representatives, neighbours in the same buildings, who travelled by their own means, and whose existence was in line with the same parameters of their fellow citizens. The civic spirit of a Prime Minister, such as the Swede, Per Albin Johansson, who died in 1946 from a heart attack whilst waiting for a tram in a station in Stockholm. The politician, as Marc Sangnier also said, does not direct the people, because he is the people. A people who knows the way, or who takes public transport along with his legitimate representatives. The sharing of a lifestyle and unity in the purposes of citizenship and power.

2. POVERTY AS AN ENEMY OF THE GREATNESS OF HUMAN DIGNITY

But, must one be poor, or want to be poor, to understand and combat poverty? The biblical assertion is that, “All who exalt themselves will be humbled, and all who humble themselves will be exalted”. It’s clear that those who take on a vocation of service must perforce decrease, and from that reduced condition become aware of the vulnerability of the humblest among us.

As a lawyer, Giorgio La Pira devoted a monographic reflection to studying how “the poor are waiting”, that is, how the almost natural state of people who are in the worst material situation is to wait. And again, for La Pira, “the old mechanisms of the State of 1800”, which he described as “agnostic in the face of these problems”, became the first obstacle to overcome in the supreme goal of raising those poor individuals to full awareness of their own dignity, and contributing to converting them into protagonists of their own narrative:

*“What are the poor, the unemployed, the needy waiting for? The answer is clear: a government that has a somewhat unique objective: the organic struggle against unemployment and penury... That is, a government that necessarily tends, via all the appropriate technical, economic and political instruments, towards maximum and full employment”*⁶

The director of the film, *Bicycle Thieves* (*Ladri di biciclette*, 1948), the great Vittorio de Sica, included a chilling prayer by the poor in which poverty was not understood as

5 MOUNIER, E.: *Fe cristiana y civilización*. Madrid. 1958, p. 79.

6 LA PIRA, G.: *Para una arquitectura cristiana...*, pp. 258 and 261-263: [“The men of government must engrave this principle in their minds as a guide for their political, legal economic and financial actions: guarantee work and daily bread for all. The entire construct of the economy, finances, politics and culture must be built upon these primary, elemental and essential objectives. Freedom itself... is preceded and conditioned by these primordial demands of work and bread.”] Own translation.

an irredeemable condemnation, but as an exercise of communion with the simplicity and humility of Jesus Christ:

*"I PRAY: I want to leave this holy place with a purified soul and serene spirit. Enlightened, I now return to my bodily poverty to once again walk the paths of pain and deprivation. I will not feel alone and comfortless. I thank you, my Jesus, for the spiritual gifts you have given me. I thank you for the grace that my body will receive, in your name and with exalted humility, from the hands of those who firmly believe that every action against poverty and penury is like a caress and a kiss on the cheek of Christ for the sake of suffering humanity. Give back to them and their families in blessings, all the goodness of their charity..."*⁷.

La Pira and De Sica were contemporaries, compatriots, and co-religionists. They wanted to transcend purification of the soul to access the condition of the poor, to reach poverty as reality and attitude. They did so from a standpoint of compassion, that is, the shared passion of those who know how to suffer with those who suffer and endure hardship with those who endure hardship. Because it's not that one is not a Christian; rather, the one who cannot walk a mile in another's shoes is not a citizen. On 2 March 1980, just three weeks before his barbaric assassination on 24 March, the archbishop of San Salvador, Oscar Arnulfo Romero, described the difference in the time of Lent between the impoverished and the prosperous⁸. Considering someone else's Lent, their living conditions, their hopes and dreams, their needs as a condition of a truly civic presence in the world, that is, a builder of the common good.

To truly realise the magnitude of the drama of material scarcity is an essential part of that awareness in thought and action. The superior principles of justice are not defined in terms of an inaccessible superiority, but in effective guidance of public law and private law. When the value of a human is affirmed, as conceived by the Western cultural tradition, the freedom and imperfection of that person is considered as the principle of orderly equality and human fraternity that makes possible their growth in harmony and civic harmony. That is why, when one looks at the world reality and, in particular, the unequal distribution of wealth and opportunities, it can rightly be said that "the present order of things is truly blasphemous"⁹.

3. IN CONCLUSION: IT ALL STARTS TODAY

Nearly twenty years ago, a wonderful film by Bertrand Tavernier, *It all starts today* (*Ça commence aujourd'hui*, 1999), which took place in the far north of France, in Flanders at the

7 ZAVVATINI, C.: *Ladrones de bicicletas*. Mexico D. F. 1977, p. 86. Own translation.

8 ROMERO, O.: *La violencia del amor*. Edition prepared by James R. Brockman, SJ. Santander. 2002, p. 205: ["Fasting during Lent in those countries where one can eat well is not the same as Lent among our peoples of the Third World, who are malnourished and perpetually living Lent in constant fasting. In these situations, for those who eat well, Lent is a call to austerity, to let go to share with those in need. On the other hand, in poor countries, in homes where hunger exists, Lent must be celebrated as a motivation to give a sense of a cross of redemption to the sacrifice one lives, but not for a false conformity that God doesn't desire, but so that, feeling in one's own flesh the consequences of sin and injustice, each one is stimulated to work for social justice and true love for the poor. Our Lent must awaken that sense of social justice"]. Own translation.

9 URIARTE GONZÁLEZ, L.: "Caridad y desarrollo verdaderamente humano". *Corintios XIII Revista de teología y pastoral de la caridad* nº 107-108. *Desarrollo de los pueblos y caridad*, pp. 131-172. Madrid. July-December 2003, p. 146.

height of an industrial crisis, where a mother commits suicide along with her two children after they saw their electricity cut off because they couldn't pay for it. The question proposed was whether it was possible that, in a country like France, at the end of the 20th century, something like this could happen. That is, the same thing that has been happening, for example, in Spain. Those are the essential questions for citizens, for public authorities, and for the construction of the common good. The day a society ceases to ask such questions, it will be dead.

One of the foundational footings of the new democracy and the new Europe that emerged from the drama that, after more than three decades of criminal hatred and destruction, reached its end in 1945, resided in the broad public consensus that settled on the need to reserve to political action the capacity to adopt the major strategic decisions affecting citizenry. Among those decisions are the decision-making capacity over basic supplies, vital infrastructures, and the meeting of the needs that make possible the exercise of fundamental rights. Half a century ago, in his Encyclical Letter, *Populorum Progressio*, on the development of peoples, Pope Paul VI said that, "Development is the new name for peace". However, still today, poverty remains the main enemy of that peace.

Jacques Maritain said that the answers that philosophy usually offers when thinking about the suffering of men are not enough, but they are necessary. The time has come when the responses of thought must move from speculative sufficiency to effective sufficiency. Therefore, the reflection on the struggle against poverty, it is compulsory that a historian of legal, political and institutional forms says so, is also a reflection on the role of public authorities, that is, on the role of the State, within the dynamic of a political community in which economic activity must tend to efficiency, but also to equity. Because, in the end, the debate on the action of public authorities and political action for the eradication of poverty affects the very essence and nature of public life and, therefore, the definition of the rule of law. It's been more than six decades since Giorgio La Pira was able to establish the essential obligations of public authorities effectively committed to eradicating poverty. Even now, La Pira's challenges continue to be our challenges:

"The political society cannot fail to express a judgment on human nature, to which it will have to adapt its ordinances. According to the theoretical basis, its interpretation of man, that's how the legal and political order that will adapt to him will be.

An agnostic political society, –a State– does not exist. There is a political society that, if it wants to be in conformity with concrete historical facts and with real human nature, cannot do without the religious orientation of man and the hierarchy of values that it implies"¹⁰.

10 LA PIRA, G.: *Para una arquitectura cristiana...*, pp. 239 and 241: ["Reorganising society on the foundation of work is a Christian thesis. The productive aspect of the human personality, in a broad sense, is different from the political one. One is the foundation of professional *status* and constructs the professional community; the other underlies the *status civitatis* and builds the political community. Both activities are distinct, given that politics, as Aristoteles and Saint Thomas state, is an architectural activity related to the human personhood and has references and ordinates, with the entire hierarchy of human values"]. Own translation.