

Why I Have Given Up Serving the Poor

Claudio Oliver, Winter - 2009

Those who know me may find the above title curious, to say the least. Being with the poor is part of my history: My grandfather and grandmother were founders of the Salvation Army here in Brazil, and their ministry is a central reference for my family. Their life was dedicated to the homeless, prostitutes, and in a special way to the orphans, the hurt and the renegades. My teenage passion was consumed by the idea of fighting against poverty, hunger and injustice. Since I got married, 25 years ago, I have been involved in serving in slums, serving poor students, needy populations, beggars, peripheral neighborhoods, the unemployed and other moneyless people. I could report facts to support my pretensions such as having helped generate income, facilitated the organization of families, made bridges between rich and poor, fed people, and given others the opportunity to discover professions, find a vocation and transform their future. To “empower” people was once a key point in my practice of not creating dependency. After all of this, or even because of all this, today I am called to question my whole life and to give up serving the poor.

Throughout my life I keep a habit of always asking myself whether what I am doing makes sense, whether my heart is aligned with God’s will, whether I am not missing the point. With discipline, I follow the three “whys” rule, which questions each given answer with the kind of question that only children ask, and which helps me to generate a permanent transformation vector of self-criticism and of personal adjustments. Thus, in each step, for every thing I do, I ask: why? Whatever the answer might be, again I ask: why? I feel I am in the right path when what I am doing surpasses the third “why”, and then I move on.

For some time I started reflecting on Jesus’ life, on the principle of kenosis, emptying, based on the text of Philippians 2:1-11, on Jesus’ incarnation in reality and on the numerous contacts and conversations he had with miserable people such as the lepers, and rich people such as the publicans, synagogue chiefs and princes of his people; with middle-class families, with proprietors and with servants and beggars. I have reflected on what he saw and how he acted. And all of this started to grow in me and made me think about the text in Matthew 5:3 with Jesus telling the poor to march on with their lives and rejoice for being poor, because theirs was the possibility of having their lives driven and controlled by God and to notice His good and perfect will. Little by little, in

these last few years, along with biblical reflection, I have observed how much several extremely sincere friends come and go, get excited with serving, but soon get busy with their errands and preoccupations. Frequently I also see how others pay for someone else to fulfill God's service, and they do that during certain periods of time, moved by real sincerity, even if from a distance and without personal involvement.

From another perspective I see how much poverty takes over the life of those who are poor, and how much it reveals their unfulfilled desire to own, to have access to consumption – the destroyer of everything – and I see how their situation is built by the seduction of the same things that seduce and destroy the rich: the same individualism, the same selfishness, the same tendency to feel comfortable and identified with being able to own things... and the absolute adhesion to a lifestyle and a way of thinking that imprisons them to the myth of modern needs, to the mythical desire to evolve and to the submission to the myth of development.

Without exception, rich, poor, and remediated have the same conviction that what they need is something that the market, money, the government or some other agency can offer them. That they will be happy with ownership, with a full stomach (some with bread, others with croissants) and with the constant flow of money that can do anything and solves everything. And among these, there are a few well-intentioned people who extend their hand to "include" others into the lifestyle or the platform they achieved. The stretched-out hand from top down, that's what we call service.

Along the years I've discovered that the very position of serving the poor, from a commitment to "liberate" them, has been filled with a sense of superiority, the kind of superiority translated into giving others what I have, assuming through my actions that what I have or do is what he/she should have or do, a translation noticed in the subtle arrogance of the so-called politics of "inclusion", always trying to put the other inside the box where I live, included in my lifestyle.

All of this led me to give up serving the poor. Though not taking sides with those who, by now, from the height of their wealth, comfort and well being say "See? That's what I always thought." I'm sorry to inform these people that in no way do I believe in their lifestyle separated from contact with the poor, with the sick, the hungry, the naked, the ugly, the smelly, the barbarian. I do not side with those who pay their taxes or contribute to charity saying that way they are fulfilling their role. That is not what I'm talking about. To these people I keep on retransmitting the message of Jesus, confronting their blind,

insensitive and arrogant lifestyle, a message that calls madness that which these call security.

I have given up serving the poor for another reason.

Since 1993, when I went to the streets with a bunch of kids toward the homeless, I had developed a spiritual discipline, for every time we went to the streets in the cold nights of my city, not to go out to meet the homeless or the needy. I would tell the kids that I would never feel like serving bread to a beggar, or make him a bed, or clothe his nakedness. The motto we used at that time was “to meet Jesus in the poorest poor”. Serving, feeding and clothing Jesus was our motivation. That did excite me. And we discovered each time we went out, that in each of these encounters with a camouflaged Jesus, the so-called miserable would be transformed into masters, into denouncers of our personal misery, into unveiling agents of our manipulation mechanisms, and we suddenly saw ourselves mirrored in them, using the same excuses and lies to get what we wanted. Perhaps more successfully, and surely with more social luck and security mechanisms. But at the time we discovered that we were them.

Those of us who experienced that spiritual perspective were freed ourselves. We grew, and we changed. Confronted by Jesus and taught by him through the contact with his poverty and misery, many of us discovered what good news meant. Those days many of us were transformed by Jesus’ touch and by the good news that he transmitted as we discovered ourselves as poor.

However, the mystique was not always kept as a constant burning flame. I went back so many times to serving the poor, letting myself be taken by the possibility of becoming a helper, and many times I started forgetting my own misery. As I have said above, the alternative is not to stay away from the poor and judge their attitudes from the top of my comfortable superior social position. Helping the poor, raising their consciousness of their situation and “including” them reveal an acritical submission to a myth, another one of those born out of the development politics of the last 60 years. The alternative I present here is different, discovered through encounter, recognition and identification.

I’ve given up helping the poor, given up serving and saving them. I have rediscovered a hard truth: Jesus doesn’t have any good news for those who serve the poor. Jesus didn’t come to bring good news to those who serve the poor, he brought good news to the poor. He has nothing to say to other saviors who compete with him for the position of Messiah, of Redeemer. Jesus’ agenda only brings a message for those who

recognize themselves as poor, naked, hurt, tired, overburdened, needy and hopeless. As for the rest, his agenda has little or nothing to offer.

The only way to remain with the poor is if we discover that we are the miserable ones, if we recognize ourselves, even if well disguised, in him who is right before our eyes. When we find our misery in them, when we realize our neediness and our desperate need to be saved, then we meet (could be this sense of calibrate our agendas... or something like... I don't know) Jesus' agenda.

God is not manifest in our ability to heal, but in our need to be healed. Finding out this weakness of ours leaves us in a position of having nothing to offer, serve, donate, but reveals our need to be loved, healed and restored.

Here lies the meaning that the power within us is not the power of our capacities and richness, but the power that is present in our personal misery, so well-hidden and disguised in our possessions and stability. As Jean Vanier says in a book I recently read. "We are called to discover that God can bring peace, compassion, and love through our wounds."

How much more sense does Isaiah's text about the Messiah make now: by his wounds we are healed. The remaining messiahs tend to escape Jesus' example of emptying himself to the point of becoming one of us, of dying with us and thus opening the door of resurrection for us.

The power that Jesus used to heal us and keep on healing does not reside in his access to universal power, but in his identification with us in the cross. In opening himself in wounds, in becoming one of us, in living our life.

I have given up serving the poor. I'm going back to encountering the poor and find myself in them. Again I have discovered the misery that hides in the very-well structured lives of our false security. And this way I can understand this Jesus who talks to lepers and with rich businessmen, with tax collectors in their parties and with the sick and miserable. In his identification with each and everyone, he saw what perhaps no one else did: the extreme misery and poverty of the human condition, apart from any status or social gown.

I came to reencounter my poverty, to see myself in each situation of misery, and to get in touch with my inner pain. From there, I pray for healing, freedom, community and love. I ask for mercy and be restored.

Whoever serves out of the sense of having something to offer, serves from the top. Jesus calls us to incarnate and to see ourselves in the other and to place ourselves

under him as powerless dependent. To give up trusting our own capacity and change the direction in order to meet our wounds and pain. From there discover the power in being less and not more.

I have given up serving the poor. I have rediscovered my poverty. And with it I can cry out again: "Son of David, have mercy on me."