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## Poverty & Hope in the Life of a Priest

by Terence Fransz, Bangalore, India

*In August 2001 the Jesus Caritas Fraternity of Priests held its European Meeting in Hungary. The theme was 'Poverty in the life of the Priest'. Fr. Tony Charlton, sends this response to the theme, prepared prior to the meeting by the Jesus Caritas priests in the UK.*

### **POVERTY AND HOPE**

Poverty can also work as a sign of hope, bringing out worth, value and significance which might be overlooked in a more affluent environment. While something might be disregarded or wasted in a more affluent environment, in a poorer one, its value is enhanced.

### **Solidarity and sharing**

Poverty can bring about a greater sense of solidarity among people, who can see the strength of sharing what little they have and are not trapped by what they own. The example was given of the mining communities in Northern England during a series of long drawn out strikes which left many families with little or no income for many months. The community pulled together, sharing what little it had and a sense of togetherness was established which lasted for long after the strikes were ended. Others spoke movingly about their experiences in Indonesia among refugees from East Timor and of a leper village in Ghana.

### **Availability and brokenness**

Poverty also gives space for other, more important things. Examples were given of experiences of people with little material wealth who yet demonstrated a freedom to be generous, compassionate and loving. Poverty can break a person, but it can also open a person up so that emptiness becomes openness to God and to others.

If it breaks a person, for example on some of the many housing estates in Britain's inner cities, then low self esteem can give rise to envy, violence, aggression, self-centeredness, etc.

If it breaks a person open then it can create a radical availability for others. An example was given of a visit to Poland, when an old and very poor woman insisted on giving a cup of tea and sitting patiently with them while it was drunk even though she spoke not a word of English. Language was irrelevant in an experience which was both painful and touching. Being broken open means being able to recognize that one cannot save oneself, that one needs others and having the courage to turn to them. It also implies that others cannot save themselves either and that there is a need in each one of us for the other.

### **Enriching relationships**



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Relationships enrich us, ultimately our relationship with God. Poverty which gives birth to a poverty of spirit can be the gateway to deeper and more profound relationships, and in particular in our relationship with God. Even through the failure of relationships, for example, we come face to face with our impoverishment as a person; the Holy Spirit is then apparent to us as a presence which refreshes and heals.

### **Honesty**

Through solidarity, poverty can bring us a greater honesty about ourselves, as we experience how others see us in a context of unbreakable acceptance. It can strip us of our pretensions. Experiencing poverty can bring us down to earth and cut through the pettiness of daily life. It helps us to see a scale of values. Poverty of spirit can help us to recognize and experience God's love through our weaknesses. It can make real God's acceptance of us, help us to see our solidarity with others who are weak and vulnerable and strip us of our judgmental attitude.

Since I was with Cardinal Cardijn and his specialized movements for children, young and adult workers and his sharing of the Gospel and the Review of Life, I found a similar insistence in the Fraternity, from Bishop Fulton Sheen I discovered the importance of the Holy Hour daily! The Fraternity taught me the beauty of the silent hour! I do look forward to it everyday. From Blessed Charles I've learned the power of the real and personal contact with the Lord and that God is relationship. I have the best of relationships with the Muslims: Faith is our common platform. Ecumenism comes easy. Next February I will be 75 and in my 48th year of Priesthood. As National Responsible of India I was at Santo Domingo. We are seven priests in Clergy Home, the others are retired.