

## OWITF Reflections

Dear Brothers and Friends,

On the seventeenth of last month, the United Nations challenged us to face up to our responsibility to address the evils of extreme poverty experienced by millions throughout the world. The International Day for the Eradication of Poverty is a time “to commemorate both the oppression and the courage” of poor people, according to Isabelle Perrin, ATD Fourth World. She goes on to say, “This day expresses hope for an end to the brutality and contempt inflicted on the most vulnerable people everywhere. Commemorating this day demonstrates our belief that these people, scorned and ignored, are in fact, vitally important to our communities and our nations. It shows that, together, we want to put an end to discrimination and to build a better future.”

Pope Francis echoed these words in his apostolic exhortation, *The Joy of the Gospel* when he expressed a wish that the Church be a ‘poor Church with the poor’ and his preference for ‘a Church which is bruised from being out in the streets.’ He has called us to be ‘people who awaken the world.’

It is not a coincidence that our Congregation finds itself once again grappling with its response to the cry of people made poor. With the exception of the prophetic few, we have been unable to wholeheartedly respond to this call but even now the Spirit continues to invite, prod, push, pull, lure our hearts onto this path which we find so uncomfortable and challenging. The Nairobi Chapter called us to be ‘brothers for the world’. This is a call ‘to be’ rather than ‘to do’, to enter into relationships with those made poor in ways that emphasize equality and interdependence. Sometimes we talk about seeing the world through the eyes of the poor. Is that possible for one who has a roof over his/her head, a warm bed and plenty to eat? Listen to Therese, an ATD Fourth World worker from Senegal: “No one has a monopoly on knowledge. We each know different things. People talk about ‘the poor this’ and ‘the poor that.’ But the poor are the ones who think night and day. Someone with no worries can lie down at night thinking only of sleep. But someone who doesn’t know how to feed his family tomorrow, keeps thinking even when lying down at night.”

Fatima, another ATD Fourth World worker from Burkina Faso, writes: “There are so many projects, so many words and books, so many researchers—but despite this, poverty persists. I believe all these words are understood, from A to Z, but I wonder if we need a new alphabet in order to see poverty in new light.”

Perhaps, at last, we brothers are beginning to see people made poor differently and to learn this new alphabet. We speak now of ‘Community Engagement’ not even ‘Community Development’. ‘Engagement’ connotes a desire to get close to, to rub shoulders with, to roll up our sleeves and get our hands dirty, to join in the tears and the laughter of ordinary people. While the soup kitchens have a part to play, the voices of those made poor seem to be calling us to something altogether different and infinitely more difficult namely, become involved enough to understand why the people are hungry.

Dorothy Day spent her life caring for the poor but also had moments when she wondered whether she was doing anything of consequence at all. Listen to her words in her poem *Soup Bowls*:

*I have had to stop myself sometimes.  
I have found myself rushing from one person to another  
Soup bowls and more soup bowls,  
Plates of bread and more plates of bread,  
With the gratitude of the poor  
Like a loud din in my ears.  
Then I realized that this is dangerous work.  
To want to help people is a grave temptation.  
Maybe we are just helping ourselves by helping others.  
This is a long loneliness.*

The approach of Danilo Dolci, the noted Italian activist, is very inspiring. At the age of twenty-seven, he went to live with the poorest of the poor in Trappeto, a small, slum-like village of fishermen and peasants in the western part of Sicily.

When he reached Trappeto, he did not yet have a clear idea of what he was going to do, except that he was there “to give a hand.” After spending a few days in a tent on the beach, he was hosted by a friendly family and from there he started learning the local language and working as a peasant and casual labourer. The economic situation was pathetic: there were no sewers, no roads, no jobs, no basic services, little fresh water and even fishing did not sustain the population, because of the exploitation of illegal fishing. The turning point came when Benedetto, a one year old child, died of hunger. Danilo was shocked by the event; he could not accept that children die of poverty, that the State neglected its citizens. So he started a hunger strike on the bed where the child died. This was the beginning of an extraordinary life which made a difference to the lives of many thousands of people.

Danilo believed that the resources necessary for liberation were already within the oppressed themselves, at least the most critically conscious ones. In fact, nobody could ‘develop them’, but they had to become the conscious agents of their own emancipation. Danilo has much to teach us as we strive to make ‘Community Engagement’ our approach to mission into the future. Can we learn this new alphabet? For many of us it is akin to learning to read anew. Perhaps many of us are happy to reread the old books while the new ones remain unread on the shelves! We fear to risk the dislocation of not knowing what lies up ahead. We still haven’t fallen in love with the ‘not yet’.

The lives of Dorothy Day and Danilo Dolci are most relevant today. They are finding their voice again in the words and deeds of Pope Francis. The call is to engage, to be with, to roll up the sleeves and get involved. It is indeed a new way of being brother for the world.

Your brothers,  
David, Declan, Donal, Francis, Ruvan and Sunil.



**Danilo Dolci**  
**(1924 – 1997)**