

•PBRO. LUIS PÉREZ AGUIRRE

THE YEAR HAS GONE BUT POVERTY REMAINS

The United Nations declared 1996 as International Year for the Eradication of Poverty. This was a praiseworthy objective for this world which all of us know has more than sufficient wealth to ensure that nobody should go in need, but where the unfair distribution of wealth means that over 4 billion people are qualified by the United Nations as being poor.

A few days ago, *Forbes* magazine reported on the situation of the 400 richest people in the United States and particularly on the fortune of the richest person of all, Bill Gates, Chairman of Microsoft, the software enterprise. The report in *Forbes* stated that he alone possesses 18.5 billion dollars. Perhaps nobody can imagine what a human being can do to use and spend such a fortune nor understand that someone who has such a sum available in his wallet says that he does not have time to enjoy it. But the magazine abounds in other details. There are already 121 people in the States who have over one billion green notes. If we were to add up the fortunes of this group of privileged people, we would reach the sum of 477 billion dollars. This means some 39 billion dollars a month or, to say it differently, 132 million per day, or 5 and a half million per hour.

Setting aside the *Forbes* report, and turning to a more universal source of data, the UN Report on Human Development, we can see that 358 multimillionaires around the world possess a fortune equivalent to that of 45% of the poorest population of the planet, that is to say 2.4 billion human beings. Bill Gates alone has more dollars than the entire population of Afghanistan (18 million), Chad (six million) and Bhutan (two million) together. Someone once said that this problem of 358 multimillionaires vis-à-vis the rest of the poor world could be represented as follows: 358:2,400,000,000, or if you like: 0.00000006 per cent = 46 percent. This implies that these 358 super-millionaires hold the same amount of money as 46 percent of the poorest world population, that is the 2.4 billion poorest people on the planet.

Although poverty is not a situation that depends on statistics, they can help us to understand that all human beings do not enjoy the same possibilities or have the same rights, solemnly established in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. The United Nations defines poverty as the situation of those who have less than 400 dollars per year to live on, that is to say, who are trying to survive on a little over one dollar per day.

Today, one out of five inhabitants of the Earth are in this situation: 1.3 billion inhabitants.

Nothing seems to be enough to make us aware and react towards such a contradiction (I was going to say human stupidity). And the praiseworthy intention of the UN on declaring an international year for the eradication of poverty also seems to have failed in its objective to make us aware. At this date, it would seem that the year went by uneventfully, and that poverty will continue rampant before the obscene ostentation of a handful of multimillionaires. While you peacefully read these thoughts, one hundred children will have died from hunger. Along another line of thought, the European Union has just approved a new regulation specifying that cattle may not be transported for longer than eight hours by truck, as this causes them stress. The rich countries do well to concern themselves over animal stress – creatures of God – but do you think that they have noticed the stress produced in 1.4 billion people by trying to live on a dollar a day?

Nobody is poor by devotion, nobody wants their children, their family to live and die in the most atrocious misery or to endure the indignity of economic indigence. It is obvious that there must be some cause, something that makes whole populations who until a few years ago had been living in dignity, find themselves today in a tragic situation. It is not possible to remain impassive while this fifth richest part of the world has income 150 times higher than the fifth poorest part. The situation cannot continue where in the rich countries, only one quarter of the world population is consuming 70% of the energy, 75% of the metals, 85% of wood and 60% of food of the planet. The latest report by UNICEF leaves us gaping when we learn that today the world is spending more on playing golf (40 billion dollars) than on social policies for children (34 billion dollars).

In the past, the States could make their own decisions on economy, making use of their sovereignty, however today it is other world or transnational «authorities» that make these decisions. In fact, the global economy nowadays is not managed by a small group that makes decisions, but by a sort of dynamic inertia of a system made up of many actors who are hard to control: not only some powerful states (the famous «Clubs» of Paris and London), but also transnational corporations, banks, social groups, own-

ers of mass media, etc. Furthermore, these actors get together in partnerships (for example between the financial and business powers, or the multinational corporations). To this is added the so-called *economic speculation bubble*, that manages large quantities of fictitious, unproductive money, and that on a single day can move more capital than the GDP of powerful countries such as Spain or France.

To this should be added the absurd spending on producing and trading arms. This «business» moves a total of 815 billion dollars (equivalent to the income of half the world population). At the Copenhagen Conference, Mayor Zaragoza stated, *«It is unacceptable that there are countries that do not want to abolish arms trade with the excuse that this would create further unemployment.»* According to a study made in the United States, money used for civilian purposes creates 25 percent more employment than if used for military purposes. According to the UN, one million dollars used for civilian purposes, produces 51,000 jobs more than for military purposes. An example of this hypocrisy: 50 percent of Spanish development aid loans between 1977 and 1995 were devoted to the sale of military material to countries such as Morocco, Jordan, Somalia and Lesotho, while 40 times less has been given for educational programs.

The model of economic development centered on the market alone has clear social and ecological limits, that end in that inevitable process of social dualization shown by the figures mentioned earlier on. The economic model that is imposed is not at all «free». On the contrary, it is perfectly totalitarian. It admits no debate, no discussion. It dogmatically imposes solutions on a planetary scale, that beyond all evidence, are neither proclaimed nor wanted. The free market does not exist for the poor. Money increasingly leaves behind important communities that have accumulated difficulties for one reason or another in gaining access to the world of employment and goods. The breathtaking increase in wealth produced by the incorporation of new technologies into the production process faces the paradox of a reduction in the global amount of employment socially necessary and there is no redistribution of the wealth generated, but rather an obscene increase in the accumulation of wealth by a handful of individuals

and in the abysmal inequality between people, social communities and countries.

The faces of poverty are many and diverse, with well defined marks –lack of basic food, drinking water, illiteracy, access to health services, etc.– that help us to elude our responsibilities and to seek other culprits or, better still, distant causes that evade our particular control because they are of a structural economic, military, social or political nature. We may even be upset and find it in poor taste to be reminded of these figures corresponding to the poverty-stricken conditions in which billions of people survive, all of them with their own drama and without hope for tomorrow.

But we cannot turn away, we cannot excuse ourselves without abdicating or betraying our very condition as human beings. We are in some way responsible for this situation. If selfishness and indifference is rooted in our hearts, it will be very hard for any fruit to be born of love towards the excluded, the other, indigent of my solidarity. We must be aware that the situation also starts to change within ourselves. And in my case, as a Christian, the judgment of Saint John, in his first Letter, is unappealable: *«If you possess goods in this world, and seeing that your brother is in need, you close your heart, how will the love of God be in you? My sons, let us not love each other merely with words and words alone, but with deeds and in truth.»*

What this means is to rebuild hope for the poor, their capacity to resist under the pains of rampant selfishness and their capacity to believe in utopia. It means strengthening a new planetary and solidary civil society, a new consensus arising out of a new awareness, a new cultural, ethical and spiritual force willing to fight for unpostponable changes via a responsible strategy to deal with the immorality of a market pseudo-ethics. Simply: to chose saving life (in view of the one hundred children who died while you read this article) in the reconstruction of hope.

- SERPAJ Servicio Paz y Justicia. Uruguay Has been trustee of Human Rights up UN