INTRODUCTION

In face of the impoverishment of great masses of people, especially in abandoned and marginal areas of large cities and in forgotten rural areas “religious communities of insertion” have arisen as one of the expressions of solidarity: the preferential evangelical option for the poor. These communities intend to accompany the poor in their process of integral liberation, but are also fruit of the desire to discover the poor Christ in marginalized brothers and sisters, in order to serve him and become conformed to him; […] to make the Gospel present in sectors of the population which are without hope; bring them closer to the Word of God, and to make them feel a living part of the Church; […] clear testimony to the hope that it is possible to live as brothers and sisters, despite all situations of suffering and injustice.’ (Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life, Fraternal Life in Community, n. 63)

In this document, the Church invites religious to live the evangelical option for the poor, facing the modern impoverishment of great masses of people and creating communities inserted in marginalized areas; the document expresses very well in synthesis the values of this insertion. One of the great challenges presented by the Spirit to religious life and in particular to the Franciscan family are the slums. From there rises again the call heard by Paul “Come across to Macedonia and help us” (Acts 16:9).

The growth of big cities in developing countries is an important reality of our world; it is a sign of the times that requires attention and understanding. This growth is parallel, however, with the birth and growth of slums-- the living space where the poor are able to get their share of the life and goods of the city. The slums are increasing in all parts of the world, even in the cities of the richer countries. It is estimated that at world level the 25-35% of the urban population live in absolute poverty; for Africa it is put at 70%. They are settlements densely packed, often illegal and unrecognised by the authorities, with inadequate shelters and inadequate or not-existing services, where the people live on precarious employment, are left unprotected against the threats of nature, water and fire, and the violence of the
powerful, legal and illegal. The slum offers mirages of a new life but it is “a land that devours its inhabitants” (Nm 13:32); it is a vortex that sucks the life and destroys the hope to emerge from the circle of poverty.

IN KOROGOCHO

In August ’96 I spent a month in Korogocho, one of the many slums of Nairobi, where the Comboni Missionaries have a community. It was a month that marked me for life. It was my first encounter with a community which lived inserted in a slum and with a poverty and degradation that I didn’t think possible. And I felt at once that I was called to this life: “This I want, this I ask for, this I desire with all my heart”. I was spending my days accompanying either Fr Alex or a Kenyan Jesuit postulant who visited AIDS patients in the slum. Such encounters had their impact on me, in spite of the language barrier. Ruth appeared in the slum with her two small children, the younger a few months old. Nobody knew from where she came and how: thrown out or running away, perhaps trying to get a place to die. She was in the last stage of AIDS. I still have before my eyes the mass celebrated by Fr. Alex in her shack: her prayer and her tears, the eyes of her children. I remember my last meeting with her: I was following the postulant: she was serene, full of the affection she found in the slum. When leaving, I greeted her trying to say a couple words in Swahili and kindly she rebuked me saying in English: “Why do you keep quiet or just say a few words? I want you to come and talk with me”. I answered that I didn’t know she could speak English. I was surprised and happy and I promised her to come back. I couldn’t fulfil my promise and I didn’t see her again. Two days later I got the news that God had called her. The police took her body; her children we brought to Mother Teresa’s sisters.

That promise not kept remained inside of me and from that moment on the words about the fidelity of the biblical Ruth have become a personal call to me: “Wherever you go I shall go, wherever you live I shall live. Your people will be my people and your God will be my God” (Rt 1:16). And the prayer of Jesus for his apostles, “Father, I want those you have given me to be with me where I am so that they may always see my glory” (Jn 17:24), became for me the desire to be where Jesus, poor and crucified, is so alive and real. Back in Ghana I found it difficult to go back to my normal life. I asked to go and live in Korogocho for a year and there I was asked to follow the AIDS patients. There began the most precious time of my life, the encounter with such people becoming an encounter with God. ‘Abba’ is really doing great things with the least of his children. In a situation not unlike that of hell, I feel that places like this are the contemporary concentration camps, where people are condemned to live and die only because they are poor (and many times this means simply being too good), where life is not valued at all, where you can be killed for a few shillings, where people live on garbage, but where I had the revelation of the face of God. I lived in community with Fr Alex and Fr Anthony and Gino, a lay missionary; it was a great gift staying with them, knowing what God is doing through them: and it was a great gift praying, reflecting, labouring, hoping and dreaming together. Their presence animated a network of jumuyia (Small Christian Communities) and huduma (ministries, diakonia) creating the communion of God in the slum, embracing the most marginalized, robbers, prostitutes, those working and living on the dumping refuse of Nairobi, street children, sick people. I spent my days visiting the sick in their shacks. Sr. Gill, MMS, had created a network of solidarity forming and training people in the slums who volunteered to care for the sick of their area. It was a grace to journey with them. In going from shack to shack, everything became new, everything became true. Prayer. I never heard the word “Father” (Baba) pronounced so often, so naturally. Sickness, suffering, death (it was estimated that
70% of the population of Korogocho was HIV+), reveal a world of faith, prayer, of compassion and communion, so deep and precious. They reveal the hand of God. “This sickness is not for death, but for the glory of God, so that through it the Son of God may be glorified” (Jn 11:14). How many saints, true saints, how many journeys towards sister death that were speaking of life, how much compassion and communion; people reborn in the Spirit by AIDS, who were giving themselves to assist and serve those more sick than they were, so many evangelical deeds: to welcome a sick person into a shack already over-crowded, to share food, to pray together. I never felt the Eucharist so real as when celebrated in the shacks of the sick. With their reflection, the Word shared was true life, with their prayer, the prayer of their children, of the community.

Atieno, in her twenties, tells me her story of a life of humiliation and toil, (“but I got used to it” she continued to repeat); now she was living with her husband from whom she was receiving only blows and whom she was awaiting in the evening with terror (“I prepare food for him and when I hear that he is coming I try to run away. If he catches me he will beat me”). But she prepared food for him every day; she lived selling some vegetables on the street; she took care of the three small children of the other wife of her husband, who had died recently; she had a daughter whom she desired so much to have with her, but who was away in the village. No love for her, but she was caring for the three children and was dedicating herself to them with such a strong motherly love that nobody would have imagined that they were not her children. And at the time of her sickness her only worry was for the children. She fought against the sickness so as not to leave them alone, until it became too much even for her and she went to rest in the arms of the Father. How real for the poor are the words of St. Paul: “For me to live is Christ and death a gain”! How many people wait for sister death to rest in God, but have to go on living among a thousand sufferings on behalf of their children, to be a gift, because “it is more necessary for you that I remain alive” (Phil 1:21-24). How much tiredness, how much suffering. Fr. Mazzolari once wrote: “Somebody says, ‘The poor are used to suffering’. But I tell you that calluses don’t grow on the heart of the poor”.

AT OLD FADAMA

In 2002 I got the permission to live in a slum of Accra, called Old Fadama. On the 15th of July of that year I started to live there. It was a moment of tension; the government had just announced the demolition of the slum and the forced eviction of its inhabitants. This was postponed and now, also through the intervention of some NGOs, instead of eviction the plan is to offer an alternative settlement to the population. I felt really welcomed in the slum, even with the puzzling and questioning about my reasons of being there, and with the possible answers (drugs, prostitution, etc.). Usually the slums are in the periphery of the city; where economic apartheid relegates the poor to the margins. Korogocho, as many slums of Nairobi, is in the periphery, hidden under the level of the sewerage system; they don’t even exist on the map of the cities, they are just blank spaces. In this Old Fadama is an exception. It is situated in the centre of the city, both in terms of location (you walk a few minutes and you reach the commercial and administrative heart of Accra, Parliament, Supreme Court, the great palaces and skyscrapers), and as social space, (the nearby market, Agbogbloshie, is the most frequented spot in Accra). The slum is on the Korle Lagoon-- the name Fadama is a Hausa word for marsh-- the settlement was born by the filling of the marsh with refuse from the city and by people’s building on top of it. Now the population is estimated at around 80,000 people, crowded in a little more than 10,000 shanties, covering an area less than half a square km (roughly like the Vatican). The slum is
also called, but only by and for those who don’t live there, Sodom and Gomorrah; it is a name that weighs down on the inhabitants. The slum has always been seen as a den for criminals and prostitutes. Even if it is true that these places are breeding areas for crime and illegal activities, the reality is that the great majority of people are simply trying to come out from the claws of the poverty of their villages. They live on the humblest jobs and are the first to suffer under the tyranny and the violence of criminality. But it is always so easy to give a bad name to the poor.

“You have made us pass through fire and water” (Ps 66:12), says the Psalmist. In the slums these two elements are a continuous threat. Water is not so dangerous as it was a few years ago when floods caused even death, but still the rainy season leaves most of the shanties flooded. If it rains at night, for many it means they spend the night standing, waiting for the level of the water to subside and trying to remove it. The drainage system is practically not existent and everybody tries to manage raising the ground level. Who remains on low ground finds his house flooded. Living in the slum is a continuous struggle, every once in a while you need to tear down your shack, raise the ground and rebuild it. During the rainy season there is mud everywhere, so much mud (and would it be only mud!) that to just walk around, you feel your spirit dampened. I remember what Etty Hillesum said of the Westerbork concentration camp: “There is so much mud that somewhere between the ribs we need to possess a great inner sun if we don’t want to become a psychological victim to it”.

Water’s brother is fire, every year we have 15-20 fire outbreaks, last year one fire reduced to ashes around 500 shacks. These shacks are made of wood, plastic, cardboard, wound together by a maze of electrical wires that give you a shock only to look at them; then there is the use of fire, of candles with a continual breeze coming from the lagoon.

My writing today is accompanied by a continuous hammering; 50 meters away they are rebuilding an area of around 100 shacks completely burned down two days ago. Here the houses will grow again like mushrooms, many are the property of landlords (many don’t live here) who rent them out. This is one of the most profitable businesses of the slum; for them fire is part of the risk of the investment. But there are people who have lost everything, who find themselves in possession only of what they wear and there are those who have to go back to the village with empty hands and a heart full of despair. Newcomers, however, are never lacking. It is not easy to live in a slum; a woman was saying to me, “Here is a mother with children, if you are not ‘wild’ you cannot survive”. Unlike Korogocho and many similar areas, there is not much violence in Old Fadama, I think that its being near the centre of the city helps a lot. People are not segregated; they are part of the social life, and there is work, humble and despised, but work nonetheless. There are people from all parts of Ghana, especially from the North, the poorest area, and from the bordering states; it is a Babel of languages and cultures, but they live together with fair mutual understanding. The place looks like an ant-hill, with something going on at every hour of the day or night. The majority are young people, working especially in two areas: the various markets and streets of Central Accra as hawkers and porters and the metal scraps recyclers. The latter work boasts of a business chain started by the scrap-collectors who comb the whole of Accra with their push-trucks (walking even 40-50 km a day) looking for metal scraps. These will be sold to others who will separate what can be re-used, and according to their usefulness, they will end up as spare parts for dealers, or people who will transform them into coal-pots, head-pans, ovens, house or garden tools, etc. What cannot be re-utilised goes to the Tema foundries to be melted down and given new life.

Another main activity of the people is the work as porters. There are probably more than 10,000 women in the slum, the majority of whom are young girls, called kayayoo (kaya in Hausa means load, in Ga yoo
is woman), who go around the Accra markets with a head-pan offering to carry loads for a small fee. For the boys there is the push-truck for heavy loads and also for them, but never for a woman, (it is not possible to humiliate her up to such a point), there is the humblest and most despised work, kayabola (waste porters) and kayabini (toilet porters). A human being is used as a beast of burden, valued only for what he and she can carry physically. “Boys stagger under loads of wood,” cries the book of Lamentations (5:13). This is a judgement on our society that treats brothers and sisters as beasts of burden, but it is also a call to rediscover the one who was loaded with our sins. Kayayoo are the image of Christ, he is the Kayabola who “carried our sins in his body on the wood of the cross” (1Pt 2:24); John the Baptist presents him as ‘the Lamb of God who carries away the sin of the world” (Jn 1:29). Jesus offers himself as porter saying “All of you who labour and are overburdened, come to me and I will give you rest” (Mt 11:28) and Paul invites us to “carry one another’s burden; this is how to keep the law of Christ” (Gal 6:2). To prepare the Last Supper Jesus invites two of his disciples to find a man carrying a pitcher of water and to follow him. The least, in acknowledging them, in following them, opens the door to enter and lives the gift of the Eucharist. At Old Fadama we have started night classes for adults. Many have never been to school and there is a great desire to learn to read and write, to have some basic knowledge of English. It is not easy to attend classes after a day full of toil and sweat, but every evening around 70 young people attend; I feel that to give the possibility of basic education is to give the grace to grow in self-esteem and in the dignity of children of God.

GOD

A simple word sums up all that I lived in the slum: God. Here it is not possible to live without Him. He is so alive and true, in his mystery of presence and absence, in his word and silence, in the cross and resurrection of his Son and of his children; here is where his children have no other security and riches than him and they hope in him, they call him, where it is not possible to stay without him, without talking with him, even if only to ask him “why?” “but where are you?”. And he is doing great things with the humble; a proverb in Ghana says, “The tail-less animal, God does the whisking for”. It is the life of God that I met in the slum, people who have given me a clear picture of Christ poor and crucified, who have made me enter into the life, death and resurrection of Jesus in a new and vivid way, who have shown me the face of God, Father, Mother, who lives, suffers and hopes with his children. I lived the tender love of God with many sick mothers with their sick child in their arms, mothers who suffer with him, with a tenderness that only suffering can give; in the prayers of their children, like the mother who was praying “My God, will you not leave me here at least until my children can cook for themselves?”.

The death and resurrection of Jesus is so alive in the minds of with those I accompany on the journey through sister death to the Father. I remember Rose. On the evening of Palm Sunday I entered her shack. Her mother takes me by hand, saying simply “Come” and she makes me enter into the room where the daughter lies dead, having died a few minutes before. She lies with a face so beautiful and radiant (“What or whom has she seen?”, I ask myself). We remain there praying and remembering, the mother tells me of her last moments, her last words, her last smile. She is as if in ecstasy for what she has seen and felt with her daughter. Rose had suffered so much the last months, she was left just wounds and bones, but she was living on prayer. “Many times I heard her singing”, says the mother. I remember the first day I met her, I took her hand. We were talking together and then she laid her cheek on my hand, wetting it with her silent tears. What a richness in the prayers we shared together. I remember when, just few days before, I went to her, she was alone with her child, Jennifer, six years and epileptic,
who was undergoing a strong attack. “They are coming every five minutes”, Rose tells me. She couldn’t
do anything, not even look at her daughter, for the bed the daughter was laying on was behind her back
and she could not even turn her head. She knew of the attacks from the vibrations of the bed. How much
she loved Jennifer and how much she suffered during those minutes, but how she prayed even at that
moment. Rose’s mother didn’t want to care any more for her. She was tired, she had just buried a son,
but Rose with her faith and prayer changed her and gave her new strength. And in front of the dead
daughter, the mother tells me: “When Jennifer will come back from the hospital I will take care of her,
even if she cannot move, I do not know how I can do it, but God will give me the strength”. We remain
there praying and remembering. There is not death in front of us, but the life of God.

I visit Mary. She has sent for me. I find her on the naked ground. At the death of her husband she was
thrown out of her shack by his family. Another poor woman offered her a small side-room, without
floor; in the corner is a bag with all her possession. She tells me her life. In her heart there is not a sign
of resentment, of hatred, only of so much tiredness. She talks of God and I still feel in her heart the
gentleness she was talking with. She tells how Baba helped her, has not left her alone. Her little children
are with her old mother in the village; they depend on her. For this reason she has to stay in Nairobi to
try to get something to send to them. If only the chest wouldn’t pain so much and God would give her
some strength to go out and look for casual work. Living in a slum is nothing extra-ordinary, is living
the ordinary of God. It is to be where he is, where he is present and so alive in his mystery of cross and
resurrection. It is to try to live in simplicity and humility, knowing that we cannot do it all. And God
lives so deeply in many of the poor; offering them a sense of communion with them, a sign that what
they live is so precious, so great, even if it is nothing in the eyes of the world.

CONVERSION

“The Lord gave me, brother Francis, thus to begin doing penance in this way: for when I was in sin, it
seemed so bitter for me even to see lepers. And the Lord himself led me among them and I showed
mercy to them. And when I left them, what had seemed bitter to me was turned into sweetness of soul
and body” (Test.).

They are really precious moments when we receive the gift that what was so bitter is transformed in
sweetness of body and soul, moments that make us see the face of Christ which is most disfigured. They
are treasures we carry with us our whole life; despite the pressures of daily life, poverty, stench, mud,
pollution and the fear of what they do to our health, the ‘spiritual’ pollution, the spirit of the world, of
power, sex and possessions that reveal themselves in a ugly, but no less real way; the violence and
competition. Life here is valued as nothing; all these things weigh the spirit down. It is not possible to
feel ourselves saints in the slum. I am in daily contact with my desires of life, with my egoism, here
truly “my sin is always before me” and I learn how precious is a contrite and humbled heart. “Keep
yourself in hell and don’t despair”, was the prayer of Stephen of Mount Athos. There is no need of
many meditations on hell in a slum, it is here in the eyes, in the nose, in the heart; it is a place of
conversion and penance, every day I need God, I need to remember what he has done to find strength
and trust, I need to ask for forgiveness and to be forgiven. Here I am naked and without defences,
without big titles and what I am doing is nothing before this ocean of sufferings. Even brother fire is
speaking of conversion and penance in the slums. Fire is never missing here. There is always a great
desire to burn the refuse, the garbage. High, dark and pungent smokes, refuse of plastic, waste, car tyres.
The poor air that we breathe expresses a great desire for renewal, for new life. There is a great need of purification and conversion, of revolution. The words of Jesus come to mind: “I have come to bring fire to the earth and how I wish it were blazing already!” (Lk 12:49).

We are in the centenary of the conversion of St. Francis and I think that this event calls us, the Church and the world to penance. In the end all we are doing is chaff in the wind. What is worthwhile before God, the sacrifice that God desires, is a “contrite and humbled heart”, a life of conversion and penance. The way of peace and fraternity is found only in the humility of forgiving and been forgiven, in thanking God everyday for the gift of brothers that forgive me and whom I forgive. The Church received the gift of the mea culpa through Pope John Paul II. It is a prophecy that we are called to assume, especially we “Penitents from Assisi”.

PRAYER

The slum lives on prayer, even before dawn from churches and mosques the singing and the prayer raise up to heaven, entire nights are spent in prayer vigil, entire days are dedicated to prayer. The slum looks like a monastery. In the mud it is impossible to live without God, without his word. Here truly “If you do not talk to me, my God, I am like those who sink into the mire” (Ps 28:1). In front of the idols of the powerful the song rises again: “The Lamb that has been slain is worthy to receive power and riches, wisdom and strength, honour, glory and blessing” (Rev 5:11). I feel it a fundamental ministry for me to live my life of prayer in the slum, in communion with the prayer that rises each day from here, adding my voice, in thanksgiving, in intercession, in adoration. It would be a great gift to be a fraternity and to live this grace to pray together.

FRATERNITY WITH THE POOR

“They must be happy when they live with people considered of little value and looked down upon, among the poor and the powerless, the sick and the lepers, and the beggars by the wayside” (RnB 9).

The most important ministry in a slum is to live there, brother among brothers, open to dialogue, to friendship, sharing the joys and toils of every day, welcoming all people and all things. Walking together, sitting together, being in the queue at the water tap, smiling at provocations, sharing the food … Walking in the slum calls me to feel the steps of God walking in his garden, living his presence in the simplicity of every person. In this I need to grow and change; it is so easy for me to judge, to feel different; I am called to the knowledge of Jesus who emptied himself and was not ashamed to call us brothers. “Let them not be engaged in arguments or disputes but let them be subjected to every human creature for God’s love” (RnB 16). I feel how important is this invitation of Francis to obedience to every creature for God’s love; this is to live the mission. We are called to live the obedience to the poor; people who have always to obey and be submitted to all people and all things, used and abused, are called to experience that “their angels continually see the face of the Father in heaven” (Mt 18:10); to see the hand of the Father who “raises the poor from the dunghill and lets them sit among the princes of his people” (Ps 113:7).
A FRANCISCAN COMMUNITY

“When the Lord gave me some brothers …”. Here in the slum of Old Fadama I miss so much the fraternity; yes, I am part of the Sowutuom community, but my participation is marginal, I miss living together the daily life, being together in the slum, praying, trying to understand, suffering, dreaming together. A fraternity inside the slum is a great gift: to welcome and espouse the communion that God is creating using the most humble and suffering. Just there where the effects of our individualism and wild capitalism are so clear and open, where the person is worth as much it can be used, ‘eaten’, where life means fight, competition, crashing of the weaker, we are called to be witnesses of the joy of living together, witnesses that the face of a brother, a sister, is worth more than any possession, that it is really the least, sick, poor, street children, prostitutes, who are the face of the Father and the gift on which to build communion and true life. I lived this fraternity as a great gift in Korogocho, even with the toil of living together; often the brother is the brother who welcomes me and forgives me and whom I forgive. But especially this is fraternity, enriched by the praying together, by sharing ideals, difficulties, dreams, sharing what God gives to his children.

THE PROPHECY OF THE POOR

What is really happening in the slum, looking deeply at it, is the life of God. The Spirit of God sweeps over the chaos and Gods creates. What we consider the periphery of history is right in the centre of the revelation of God. It is here that the Father “raises the poor from the dunghill”, that the Son of God “empties himself taking the form of a servant”, and it is here that they “give him the name which is above every other name”. It is here that in the Spirit creation is suffering the pains of labour to enter into the freedom of the glory of the children of God.

In the slums God is building the future, they are true centres of culture, the values of very old and now oppressed cultures live the meeting with the dominant culture and they judge it with the judgement of God, suffering the birth-pangs and bringing forth new life. And these values are clearly and truly Franciscan. Some examples.

Land ownership. In the slum you do not possess the land on which you live. It is a great problem, but it is also prophecy. Traditionally in Ghana, land could not be possessed privately. It is in the hand of the clan, of the stool, invested in the traditional rulers who are its administrators. The farmers don’t possess land and neither do the great majority of people. “To the Lord belong the earth and all it contains”. It is a value that requires dialogue, space and expression. And it is at the heart of Franciscanism and the word of God.

Poverty. In many shanties of kayayoo the only furniture is a wooden board and a rope where they hang their dresses. And a wooden moneybox, to save and send some money for the family in the village. It is true that nothing is cursed more in the slum than poverty and possession is the great idol that becomes consumerism and creates deeper poverty. In spite of this, their life is prophecy: the minimal use of the goods of the earth: water, food, energy, shelter, living space, etc. And today it is clear that the levels of consumption of the rich world are not sustainable, that we can go ahead only if others don’t catch up with our level of consumption. The beatitude of the world has become, “Blessed we for there are the poor, otherwise we shall all be in the kingdom of heaven”. And the Franciscan beatitude is still, “We
were content with one tunic, patched inside and out, with a cord and short trousers. And we desired nothing more.” (Test.).

Living on waste. Waste is the bread of life for many both at Korogocho and here. It is the crumbs of Lazarus that challenge our society and its lifestyle and invite it to appreciate the value of all things, not according to fashion, but with intelligence and responsibility. The work of recycling in the slums is a hymn to creativity; even in the dumping site of the slum, there are people who recycle. The son of the lady who rented me the shack is paying his school fees by collecting old slippers. And what a knowledge he had of the different types of soles and materials. It is the call of God to give a name to every thing (Gn 2:19), calling them our brother and sister. A proverb in Ghana offers the adaptability of the chameleon as an example to humans: “The chameleon says: ‘When God created the world, I wasn’t at his right, I wasn’t at his left, for this reason, when I walk on this earth, I walk with reverence and humility’.

Going on foot. The words of Chapter 15 of the First Rule “The brothers may not ride horses” are still prophetic. And the poor carry it on. The truck-pushers who walk even 40-50kms through the streets of Accra, the kayayoo who walk for kilometres carrying on their heads loads even of 50/60 kilos, the hawkers. And they pay for it with their health. Accidents. A hawker was telling me of friends knocked down by cars; a friend of hers was run over by around ten cars and none stopped, she considered herself alive by a miracle. A UNCHS (Habitat) paper, “The State of the World Cities Report 2001’ says, “By 2020, according to the International Red Cross, road accidents will kill or disable more people than war, tuberculosis and HIV combined”. And the accidents are just the tip of the iceberg for the problems of transport; pollution by traffic causes death and sickness even on a larger scale. Accra too, is suffocating under traffic pollution. And especially the poor are paying for it with their lungs and their life, starting with the children who sell at the traffic lights, to the women who sit more than 12 hours a day selling at the roadside. If we want to know why in Accra there is more anaemia than in the poorest rural areas, we just need to inquire about the carbon monoxide level. The poor strip cars as status symbol (even if they just dream it!) and reveal it as violence. The essential use of private transport and the preference for public transport is Gospel, is the Franciscan choice of non-violence and of respect for nature and fellowman.

A world built on human standards. “Mental ill-health is predicted to become the leading disease burden in developing countries, with 12 to 51 percent prevalence rates”. These words from the Habitat 2001 Report are terrible and sweep away many theories praising the development we are bringing to the poor countries. Last week newspapers in Ghana were carrying the news that it is estimated that 27% of Ghanaians suffer mental problems and that the psychiatric hospital are so crowded and lack means so that they look more like concentration camps than health facilities. I think that slums answer the need of psychic health, creating a world on a human standard, a society which you can feel part of, in which you are somebody, not one of the useless that the world judges you to be. To our individualism people respond by creating a space where the majority of people are alone by themselves for not even a single minute.

The economy of gift. “Give to everybody who asks you” (Lk 6:30). It is not only St. Francis who took this command “sine glossa”. It is a natural value here in Ghana. If you have something, you are to give it to the one who asks. There is always somebody who comes to confess, “They asked me, I had and didn’t give”. We cannot accumulate things; the true capital is people. I remember in one village people were
planning to store the corn just harvested waiting for a better time and better price for selling, since what was offered to them at the time by the buyers was so low. And a young man said: “We cannot do that. What if it happens that somewhere in Ghana somebody needs corn and I have the store full?” And how many stories in the slum of capitals vanished for a brother, a friend, a passer-by in need.

Reconciliation and forgiveness. “Love your enemy. Pray for those who treat you badly”. As to Peter, even to us forgiveness seems something out of this world, but it is part of the ordinary life of the poor. Just where there more violence exists, there is the grace of forgiveness. Forgiveness is of this world, not only, but the world lives by this love and forgiveness, found in the little ones. We need it as much we need air. They call me to Margaret, she is HIV+. As it happens for many women, it was given to her by her husband who is a slave to alcohol and to a promiscuous life. He regularly beats her. This time he beat her so wildly that she won’t be able to get out of bed for more than a month. With the Small Christian Community we propose to help her to get away. She accepts and finds a relative who gives her hospitality in another slum. One day I am called to visit her sick husband and there I meet Margaret, she has heard that her husband is sick and has come to assist him. And she will be near to him and serve him until the end, without thinking about herself and her own health. And she knew that the husband had given her the virus. And Margaret is not an exception. “Let there be no brother in the world who has sinned – however much he could have sinned – who, after he has looked into your eyes, would ever depart without your forgiveness”.

CONCLUSION

To live in a slum has been the gift of entering into the life of God. I am convinced that history, theology, economy and politics, and life itself, cannot be understood except with the eyes of the least, of the suffering. Only the Lamb who was slain can open the scroll and its seven seals. The Gospel is history, true history, and is made up of the suffering, the sick, the poor, the little. If the great enter into it, it is through the eyes of the little, and they don’t cut a fine figure. Their exploits and conquests don’t enter; these are not history of God. On this point I would like to quote the profound words of Bonhoeffer, words born from his resistance to nazi sm. I feel them mirrored in my experience and I believe that they are a great gift and challenge for living the reality of the world of today, faithful to the Gospel, in the faith of Jesus.

“It remains an experience of exceptional value having learned to look at the great events of history from below, from the perspective of the marginalized, the suspects, the ill-treated, the powerless, the oppressed and the scorned, in a word, the suffering. If in these times the bitterness and the hatred haven’t corrupted our heart; if we then see with new eyes the great and small events, the happiness and unhappiness, the strength and the weakness; and if our capacity to see the greatness, the humanity, the law and the mercy has become clearer, more free, more incorruptible; if rather personal suffering has become a good key, a fertile principle in making the world accessible through contemplation and action: all this is a personal fortune. All stands on not making this prospective from below simply taking the side of the eternal unsatisfied, but on answering to the needs of life in all its dimensions; and on accepting life in the prospective of a higher satisfaction, whose foundations stands truly on another level than below or above”.

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