

Article

The Ecological Transition *from the Perspective of the Poor* †

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† A version of this contribution was first published in French in the review *Études*. “L’écologie des très pauvres”, *Études* (detailed information regarding the volume and page number were removed for peer review). This present article is an expanded version of this article.

Abstract: In the last few years, a theological trend has developed in France that is committed to listening to the words of people in precarious situations. In the tradition of Father Joseph Wresinski, founder of ATD Fourth World, this theological movement seeks to hear the joys, the struggles, the hopes, the dreams, and the faith of those who live on the margins of the world. They are the first to be affected by social and environmental injustices. They are the first to fight poverty. They are the first to invent a sustainable way of life. Listening to and taking seriously the experiences and words of the very poor opens up new perspectives for theology, especially in the ecological field. Indeed, the link between the cry of the earth and the cry of the poor has become commonplace. According to the World Bank, it is even “evidence”. Certainly “everything is linked”, as Pope Francis writes in *Laudato Si’*, but the characterization of this link must be deepened. It is not simply a matter of juxtaposing these two cries, but of perceiving that it is only from the most excluded that fair, effective, and sustainable solutions can be proposed. Bringing their words and thoughts into our modern agoras is an essential anthropological, political, and theological challenge for ecological conversion.

Keywords: ecology; saint Francis; Laudato Si; poverty; theology



Citation: Le Méhauté, Frédéric-Marie. 2023. The Ecological Transition *from the Perspective of the Poor*. *Religions* 14: 1540. <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel14121540>

Academic Editors: Maria Isabel Pereira Varanda and Franz Gassner

Received: 28 September 2023

Revised: 1 December 2023

Accepted: 11 December 2023

Published: 14 December 2023



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1. Introduction

In the late 50’s in France, a priest experienced a new approach to tackle poverty and proposed a redefinition of the practice of charity. Father Joseph Wresinski (1917–1988) (Wresinski 2002) was himself born in a very poor family, and kept a very strong sense of humiliation caused by his family’s dependence on charitable institutions. After a few years of living in a slum east of Paris, he founded ATD Fourth World¹. In his vision, poverty is an affront to human dignity, which locks the poor in silence. However, people living in poverty have unique knowledge and experience, which need to be heard and understood. Wasting the intelligence of those who resist extreme poverty in their daily lives is a discrimination.

In the last few years, a theological trend has developed in France that is committed to listening to the words of people in precarious life situations (Le Méhauté 2022). Inscribed in this tradition of Joseph Wresinski, this theological movement seeks to hear the joys, the struggles, the hopes, the utopias, and the faith of those who camp on the edge of the world. They are the first to be affected by social and environmental injustices. They are the first to have to fight poverty. They are the first to invent and live a sustainable way of life.

Before the twentieth century, this concern to listen to the concrete experiences and words of the poor was not very present in theological studies. In postwar Latin America, certain attempts by liberation theologians testify to a more systematic concern to read the Bible, not only by listening to the poor, but also by concretely documenting their words: Mester (1989); Cardenal (1975). Here, Paolo Freire’s contribution² was essential.

From a different perspective, in France, this concern for authentic listening was carried in a strong and original way by Father Joseph Wresinski. Following his example, Bible-sharing groups were formed to read the Word of God with the poorest people. Theologians benefit from this long work of learning, maturing, and experimentation. On the pastoral

level, in 2013, the so-called “Diaconia2013” gathering³ allowed many scattered initiatives to recognize each other from the same intuition. Combined with the election of Pope Francis in March 2013, this event gave a strong impetus to the Church of France in its engagement with the poorest of the poor.

On the theological level, [Grieu \(2003\)](#) has developed a method of reading contemporary texts in connection with a theological question, a method based on critical correlations as modeled by [Tillich \(1951\)](#) or [Tracy \(1975, 1981, 1987\)](#). [Rimbaut \(2009\)](#) presented the study of a corpus constituted by the Bonne Nouvelle Quart Monde community in Toulouse. From 2011, a research seminar ([Grieu et al. 2017, 2019](#)) was set up at the Faculty of Theology of the Centre Sèvres-Facultés Jésuites de Paris, and has continued since then in different forms. It brings together people involved in local groups working with the poor, theologians, or philosophers. This seminar has been the matrix of several research works which put, each in its own way, the word of people in a situation of precariousness at the foundation of their reflections⁴.

The aim is not to make these people’s words sacred, to deny the violence they suffer. It is important to stress that the poor are neither morally better nor worse than others. However, listening to and taking seriously the experiences and words of the very poor opens up new perspectives for theology, especially in the ecological field. Indeed, the link between the cry of the earth and the cry of the poor, as first expressed twenty years ago by [Boff \(1997\)](#), has become commonplace. According to the *World Bank*, it is even “evidence”⁵. Certainly “everything is interconnected” as Pope Francis writes in *Laudato Si’* (e.g., *LS* 138), but the characterization of this interconnectedness must be deepened. It is not simply a matter of juxtaposing these two cries, but of perceiving that it is only from the most excluded that fair, effective, and sustainable solutions emerge and can be proposed. Bringing their words and thoughts into our modern agoras is an essential anthropological, political, and theological challenge for ecological conversion.

2. First Hit, First Sunk

A first way of linking ecology and poverty is to consider the poorest as the first victims of the inequalities generated or aggravated by ecological and social crises⁶. They are the first to suffer from coastal erosion, flooding, degradation of agricultural land, depletion of fisheries resources, water and air pollution, cramped housing, etc. Climate migrants are first and foremost poor people.

“Contrary to what some have claimed, it is not the mass of poor people that destroys the planet, but the consumption of the rich ([Schellnhuber 2015](#))”. However, this objective and widely shared observation is not enough to significantly change mentalities. The fact is that, in our Western countries, the poorest are also targeted by a blame game, often against scientific evidence: “For one dollar spent, the poor pollute more than the rich⁷”, the poor consume badly ([Colombi 2020](#)), the poor do not vote or vote badly! Wouldn’t the first victims be “a little responsible all the same”? A double, or even triple punishment when the so-called ecological tax system puts forward solutions that penalize the poorest people in particular, through taxes on the most polluting cars (i.e., the oldest ones, SUVs), taxes on gasoline, while their homes are often located far from employment or consumption areas and are poorly served by public transportation.

Returning to the human root of the ecological crisis is an invitation to a personal and community conversion to develop “ecological virtues⁸” that will increase fraternity and social justice. In this perspective, the very poor no longer appear only as the first victims of the environmental crisis, but as the first beneficiaries of our virtuous conversions. However, the risk is to always consider the poor as passive objects: passive victims in the face of the damage done to them, passive beneficiaries of our good feelings and actions. They are only too rarely “legitimate subjects and focus of interest⁹” in and of themselves, and therefore rarely truly political subjects.

3. First Hit, First Experts

In order to better articulate the cry of the earth and the cry of the poor¹⁰, I would like to put forward the following hypothesis: the ecological transition will only succeed on the imperative condition that it be associated with a radical reduction in inequalities, a struggle that can only succeed through the full and complete participation of the most excluded. This hypothesis is already widely deployed in the economic field¹¹. It is not only a question of reconciling the *end of the world* and the *end of the month*, but of grasping the anthropological depth of this affirmation.

Such a path is based on the observation that people in precariousness are the depositories of a “mysterious wisdom¹²” according to the Christological perspective of Pope Francis, of “cognitive potentials not erased—and even revealed—by the experiences of injustice (Le Blanc 2007, p. 220)” according to the analysis in social philosophy of Guillaume Le Blanc. They are not only victims of logics of domination that go beyond them (Pierre Bourdieu), but also depositories of a knowledge (Rancière 1987) that it is essential to hear in order to engage in ecological transition. The knowledge of those who are invisibilized, excluded from the space of the community, confronts the adversity of the dominant discourse and of solidly structured thought. It is built by *poaching* (Michel de Certeau), by *bricolage* (Claude Levi-Strauss).

Listening to the very poor and, in a more dynamic way, questioning them, means first of all hearing the story of their impeded lives, their pain, and also hearing their hopes, their dreams, their “real utopia” (Wright 2010). It means listening to the stories they develop in the midst of adversity, because “composing a fiction is not inventing a life outside of life, but arranging a zone of habitability: a dwelling for precarious times (Le Blanc 2014, p. 79)”. It is then to learn from their ability to develop solutions in the interstices of reality (Tsing 2015): watering plants with the last of the dishwater, making tea towels from used sheets. . . as suggested by a woman from the Fourth World, for example. We could also refer to the “Cartoneros” and “Recicladores” of Argentina¹³, the ragpickers of Cairo, or all the poor population often confronted with waste of all kinds. These micro-solutions, which may appear simplistic and subpolitical, are evidence of an awareness and a commitment to finding room for maneuver in reality as it is. Only the poor care for the precious resources and are able to implement a “circulatory system”, showing genuine concern for the “Common Home”. Their political implications, as stated by *Laudato Si'* through the notion of *interconnectedness*, should be more strongly emphasized.

To listen to the very poor is also to be surprised by their astonishing generosity based on an exacerbated sensitivity to any form of injustice, such as this family, leaving in the north of France, who welcomes a homeless person into a cramped social housing because, “You understand, we can’t leave him outside. We are not dogs. (. . .) With everything I’ve suffered, leaving him on the street would have been a crime”. Or this woman and her three children in a four-room apartment who still find room to take in a neighbor who was evicted with her two daughters: “I couldn’t leave her outside after all!” With them we discover that “everything happens as if the answer to poverty did not come (. . .) from wealth, but from the unpremeditated solidarity of poor lives (Le Blanc 2014, p. 105)”.

4. Genevieve and Francis of Assisi: An Anthropology to Be Reconstructed

A third level of listening remains to be explored. The expertise of the poorest does not only concern the testimony of their struggle or the responses to situations of injustice that concern them, but also the anthropological depth that the experience of misery forces them to face.

Geneviève is a Fourth World activist. She grew up in the *house in Nanterre*, which she calls a “prison for the poor”¹⁴. After many years, she wrote for herself the story of her childhood, composed poems inspired by this reality, and collected articles on this establishment. These documents testify to her tenacity in reclaiming her memory and her history. “In Nanterre, everything destroyed the human beings”, writes Geneviève. Despite everything, she also testifies to the fact that there was life in this establishment, children

who laughed, who played hide-and-seek “in the dormitory (minimum eighty beds) under the bed of the dead”, the bonds of friendship that were woven, the human kindness that sometimes expressed itself, people who dreamed. She writes:

The bed is important. . . When you are lying down, you can see a spot on the wall and it allows you to dream. . . the chair is also important. . . You can for example look through the window and see the sun shining on the wall. . . Another reason to dream and it is reassuring to see every day the shadow moving. . . when you have nothing, these are things that you have!!!

This square of light is for her the only indication of the passing of time. The movement of light through its shadow, like a makeshift sundial, becomes the only reassuring element in the greyness of a frozen daily life, where even the trees in the yard no longer seem to mark the seasons. Through her words, Geneviève suggests that the possession of these things that escape us is paradoxical: to have nothing is to *possess* a shadow.

Let me dare to echo the *Canticle of Brother Sun* of Francis of Assisi. This one praises the Most High, *Laudato Si'*, for the Sun, the moon and the stars, the wind, the sky, the clouds, the earth. It is not the useful, aesthetic creation, put under trusteeship by an owner's mentality (fields, vineyards, woods, etc.) that is sung: it is the creatures that have become fraternal because they are free and wild. In a very significant way, no animal appears in this poem, no brother, no sister that one could domesticate¹⁵. It is first of all the absence of domination which allows the fraternal link¹⁶. As with Genevieve's shadow, Francis' praise is for “elements too fluid to plant his owner's flag (Forthomme 2006, p. 9)”.

Just as Genevieve evokes joyful life only through the description of her children's games under the shrouds of the dead, so life in the hymn is evoked only through its opposite, “bodily death from which no living man can escape”. We are not reading a hymn to overflowing joy or unlimited life. Nor are we reading an ode to happy and fulfilled brotherhood. Social life is present only through the evocation of “those who forgive out of love for you”, those who take “the road of forgiveness” says Geneviève, witnessing an essential insistence for the activists of the world¹⁷. For deprived of ties or mired in ties that cause suffering, these people testify that forgiveness is indispensable for living. “We are obliged to forgive”, says Patrick, “otherwise it would be 100% war”. Forgiveness is not a charitable extra to live well. It is a condition for simply living¹⁸. It is in this sense that forgiveness is very close to the notion of creation because it is the opposite of precariousness, which destroys the social bonds, which destroys the meaning and the purpose of God's creative project: the possibility of communion. “If God did not forgive everything, the world would not exist¹⁹”.

In the hymn of San Francis as well as in Genevieve's testimony, bodily life and social life are present, but, as for creatures, they always escape us.

The body is the node on which these resonances are based. For Francis of Assisi, since his imprisonment in Perugia and his illness, through the moment he kisses the leper to the reception of the stigmata, the body is the site of an essential experience. One cannot understand the *Canticle* without perceiving that Francis wrote it while he was sick and blind. This paradoxical praise that is born from the place of suffering and poverty is rooted first of all in the encounter with the lepers (See Delmas-Goyon 2008, pp. 203–4; Dalarun 2014, p. 67; Bartoli 2011, pp. 47–48), which changes bitterness into “sweetness of spirit and body²⁰” as he specifies in his *Testament*. His song is rooted in this physical contact of a kiss, through which he discovers an original way of human life, new criteria, a new logic of relationship to the world, to others, and to God.

Also in his *Testament*, Francis writes that he was “led among them [to] have mercy on them (ibid.)”. The expression *among* is by a finality (*for*); the *with* corresponds to a requirement of method. This *among* and *with* without domination could be a guiding thread to be drawn to reread the whole Franciscan experience: *with* and *among* the poorest, *with* and *among* the animals, *with* and *among* the Saracens, *with* and *among* all creatures. . .

The very poor are finally the first “terrestrial²¹” according of the French philosopher Bruno Latour. Willingly or by force, they are the first incarnated, the first *terrestrialized*

because the body of the most deprived is the “last and ultimate resource still available to the individual (Dambuyant-Wargny 2017)”. Only they know what this can mean because only they have been forced to live with the fear of being able to rely only on their own bodies. This situation of “bodily overexploitation (Dambuyant-Wargny 2006, p. 218)” induces particular relationships with the world which are little taken into account in their consequences on the political level or in the fight against exclusion. The vulnerability of the “asphalted” body (Quesemand 2007, p. 72), swallowed up by its environment and its over-exposure in the public space will add to the feeling of guilt and shame which is “eminently social, since it is borne under the gaze of others in the confrontation of the subject with the world (de Gauléjac 2011, p. 142)”. To have only one’s own body, it is finally to be torn on the border of the natural and the cultural, of the private and the public, of the personal and the community.

In the Franciscan experience, fundamentally *anti-distancizing*, the exposure of the body to the elements opens up the distinction between body and flesh. This body, no longer being entirely subject to my will, reveals a wild and free flesh which then becomes stigmatizable. This flesh is not only an object of care, but, by calling for communion and forgiveness, it *can*²² become a source of light. Then praise *can* arise because, in a certain way, only the poor, insofar as they are a body exposed to the rain, the sun, the wind, and others, can enter into a praise for the elements because they have an immediate grasp of them, at the same time as they experience their potentially dangerous contact. One could object that this is the fundamental experience of every human being. That is true, but the precarity is not a simple consequence of vulnerability. For the poor, this existential precariousness, the vulnerability that identifies our common human condition, is compounded by a social precariousness that upsets everything and exacerbates all difficulties²³.

Everything is linked from creation in the relationship of the poorest to their body, to the social body, and, adds the theologian, to the body of Christ crucified and exalted.

5. From Representativeness to Exhaustiveness: A Policy to Be Rebuilt

Guillaume Le Blanc states that “exclusion and poverty must be interpreted in terms of inaudibility (Le Blanc 2017, pp. 55–64)”. Though how can the voice of the precarious itself be heard? How to translate it into what he calls the democratic concert of voices? Many movements around the world, such as, in France the Yellow Vests riots, show the urgency of institutionalizing singular forms of “effective auditory structures (ibid., p. 62)”. However, the sole consideration of the criterion of representativeness is not enough.

From October 2019 to June 2020 a convention gathering 150 citizens²⁴ was held. Its purpose was to write proposals to the government concerning ecological transition, after consulting experts. During this *Citizens’ Climate Convention*, the assembly was composed on the basis of a random draw of telephone numbers²⁵. The resulting representativeness does not allow the most precarious to contribute, and therefore to think about the limits of our representations. Are they really present in the debates? And if they are, will their words really be heard, welcomed, and taken into account? Is there a guarantee that these fragile words are not manipulated? Without a choice at the outset to put ourselves in a position to hear these words in depth, to *expect to hear them*, without the establishment of an ethic to allow these words be heard, the very poor will not have their place in our deliberations. Guillaume Le Blanc proposes a “parliament of the unheard (Le Blanc 2017)”. Joseph Wresinski insisted on *completeness*: if one is missing, how can the others claim to speak, to rejoice in the wedding feast? This is not an unrealistic injunction, but a dynamic imperative to always go out, to always challenge our certainties, to always relate our concepts to concrete human situations. Representativeness is more like a photo where everyone tries to have the best place or the largest number; exhaustiveness is based on a movement towards the absent, towards those who do not yet participate in our exchanges. It implies a decentering, a project, a policy, a mission.

This listening does not lead to an abandonment of universality by fleeing towards singularity, an abandonment of politics in favor of a collection of microstories of experience.

On the contrary, it should be an invitation, starting from this horizon of the periphery, to recompose the heart of our institutions.

6. Conclusions

“There is no ecology without an adequate anthropology²⁶” argues Pope Francis in *Laudato Si’*. It is not a matter of juxtaposing the cry of the earth and the cry of the poor, but of listening to the very poor in order to plunge into the anthropological roots of the eco-systemic crises our world is facing. Not only to listen to them, but to question them, not so much to ask them “what do you think?” as to ask them, such as one who questions a master, “explain it to me?” This listening and questioning is an appeal to decentralize, to abandon the overhanging position of the one who knows, of the one who has. Entering into the logic of the *among* and *with* the poor engages us all in a real spiritual struggle to let ourselves be *kenoticized* by them.

Those on whom misery and precariousness weigh not only reveal the limits of our economic model, but also the cognitive limits of a quantified rationality that has become both totalitarian and henceforth unsuited to the planet’s enclosure on itself. When faced with violence, people often say, “We don’t have the words”. Taking this experience into account can help to prevent the moment when language will no longer allow to think the world into which our ecological inconsequences have led us. It is not a question of replacing rationality by irrationality or by the feeling of sad passions. Listening to the poorest people gives the opportunity to think about our threatening weaknesses, but above all, about the opportunities present in the interstices of reality. “If we have to begin anew, it must always be from the least of our brothers and sisters²⁷”.

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Institutional Review Board Statement: Not applicable.

Informed Consent Statement: Informed consent was obtained from all subjects involved in the study.

Data Availability Statement: Data not available for direct consultation (ethical restrictions).

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflict of interest.

Notes

¹ ATD means *All together in Dignity*. It is based on the practice of Joseph Wresinski: “Wherever men and women are condemned to live in extreme poverty, human rights are violated. To come together to ensure that these rights be respected is our solemn duty”. See www.atd-fourthworld.org (accessed on 10 December 2023).

² See (Freire 1970). Freire also had a strong influence on the development of the Fourth World popular universities.

³ Many of these initiatives following *Diaconia2013* are listed on the site: www.servonslafraternite.net/ (accessed on 10 December 2023).

⁴ (Blanchon 2017), see “Introduction”, pp. 15–34 for the method; (Odinet 2021), see “Enjeux méthodologiques”, pp. 21–69 for the method, and more precisely the concept of “homologie de situations” developed by Marc Donzé, (Odinet 2018) and my own works. See (Odinet 2022).

⁵ (Skoufias et al. 2011). Further evidence can be found in (Hallegatte et al. 2018; Northcott 2001).

⁶ Any list of examples must renounce being complete: dramatic evolutions for certain geographical areas (rising waters in Bangladesh, advance of the Sahara, flooding of the Mekong Delta. . .), violence of specific phenomena (Hurricane Katrina in 2005, Hurricane Dorian in 2019). See (Larrère 2017; Gemenne and Rankovic 2019; Alier 2014).

⁷ Sentence pronounced by one of the officials of the French Agency for Energy Control reported (and deconstructed. . .) by Tardieu (2019), n°250, p. 4. Title of the issue’s dossier: “Justice, climate, same fight”.

⁸ Pope Francis, *Laudato Si’*, n. 88.

⁹ Quote from Georges Simmel in *Les pauvres* reported and analyzed by Paugam and Duvoux (2008).

¹⁰ These paths were sketched out through research by the *Fraternité de la Pierre d’Angle*, a fraternity of Fourth World Christians. The quotations from people in precarious situations come essentially from this research. See (Le Méhauté 2022).

¹¹ See the works of Thomas Piketti, Gaël Giraud or Cécile Renouard among others.

¹² Pope Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium*, n. 198.

¹³ Literally “card board people” and “recyclers”. See (Pope Francis 2013).

- 14 Founded in 1887, this prison became in 1989 “the Centre d’accueil et de soins hospitaliers de Nanterre” whose violent reality is described by (Declerck 2001).
- 15 Even in other texts where Francis of Assisi’s attachment to animals is evident, they always appear free, “birds without borders (. . .) that cross the boundary of the enclosure without permission” (Kervyn 2009, p. 73). The wolf of Gubbio is not tamed but a relationship is negotiated with the villagers according to what we could call with Baptiste Morizot an “inter-species diplomacy” where animality is neither restrained, nor domesticated. “I call “Stépanoff’s paradox” (. . .) the strange idea that, in order to domesticate the wildest desires, that is to say to live well with them and by them, it is necessary to *maintain* them in a wild state” (Morizot 2020).
- 16 “Over no man, but especially over no other brother, no brother shall ever avail himself of any power of domination” (RnB, 5,9), (Dalarun 2010, p. 196).
- 17 In a 1980 retreat, *Christ, Man of Mercy*, Joseph Wresinski states that “forgiveness is a way of living in the world of misery. Our theological work suggests that forgiveness is also a *way of believing* in the world of poverty. Understood from the perspective of the Fourth World, it allows us to go deeper into areas left fallow by *main stream* theology, Christology, or ecclesiology.
- 18 Le Méhauté Frédéric-Marie. 2023. “Comme nous pardonnons aussi. . . Entendre l’appel des plus pauvres au pardon”, in (Fédou and Graber 2023, pp. 47–68).
- 19 Sentence from a “poor old lady” reported by Pope Francis during his first angelus on 13 March 2013.
- 20 Testament 2, (Dalarun 2010, p. 308).
- 21 (Latour 2021). In a more fundamental philosophical perspective, Augustin Berque advances the concept of *ecumene*, a set of human environments, each based on the coupling between the animal body and the technical or symbolic environment (Berque 1996).
- 22 Obviously, we must take these echoes with care. The poverty of Francis of Assisi is first of all a fully chosen poverty. For the vast majority, precariousness is suffered and experienced first of all as a trial and a suffering. Listening to the poorest must not at any cost lead to naturalizing poverty, to making it acceptable or useful in some historical or divine plan! Misery and injustice are to be destroyed. However, we can learn from those who suffer most from it and who are on the front line in this struggle. Ety Hillesum wrote in her diary in 1942: “The Westerner does not accept that suffering is part of life. So he is unable to draw positive forces from it”. There is a fine line between acceptance and resignation, but the challenge is to discern anthropologically, politically, theologically. . . what these experiences of precariousness reveal as transforming and liberating energies.
- 23 Concerning these distinctions and their difficult articulations, see (Le Blanc 2007).
- 24 Meeting held in France on the initiative of President Macron to find ways to articulate sustainability and acceptability of the ecological transition.
- 25 See the note by Thierry Pech and Clara Pisani-Ferry of *Terra Nova* dated 7 December 2020.
- 26 Pope Francis, *Laudato Si’*, n. 118.
- 27 Pope Francis, *Fratelli Tutti*, n. 235.

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