Extreme poverty : The New Face of Apartheid.

Extreme poverty is a violation of human rights. The United Nations has recognised this. Like apartheid, it is based on a view of humanity that justifies, and therefore engenders, relationships that are a slap in the face of human dignity. These injustices are based on the idea that some human beings are "incompatible" with others. Everything is organised around this "incompatibility", leading to a situation in which one group of people is completely lacking in knowledge of another, and vice-versa. Instead of building a common language, only violence is fostered.

Current language refers to "restoring people's inalienable dignity." However, that dignity could never have been taken away. Every person is a human being. What is possible, however, is for a group of people to contribute to creating and maintaining conditions under which the equal dignity of each person can be expressed.

How can we not be made uneasy when human rights are called upon as an instrument of political convenience? Countries cite the human rights violations of their adversaries, only to fall silent when it suits their financial interests. Governments speaking of human rights seem cynical to us at times. But as citizens, are we really developing a culture of human rights? This means going beyond conforming to international treaties. It means bringing these texts to life by learning from human experience. It is all these issues that spark official bodies, such as the UN Commission on Human Rights.

The Final Report on Human Rights and Extreme Poverty by Leandro Despouy seemed to justify printing the following articles giving the report's background. In the first three articles, Olivier Gerhard, Leandro Despouy and Bruno Romazzotti outline the report's content, the steps taken to write it, and the surrounding context. Governments distanced themselves from those who are deprived of it. Our responsibility as citizens is to continue this effort that is so necessary given the current transformations in economies and cultures.

Ten years ago, Father Joseph Wresinski said before the Commission on Human Rights that in order to learn from those who have been deprived of the conditions needed to exercise and enjoy human rights, we must first strive together with these people to put these conditions in place. Knowledge of human rights cannot be limited to the strictly juridical; it requires the steps made by Mr. Despouy toward recognising human beings.

All of us have the responsibility to protect one another's dignity. Xavier Godinot's article is a memoir of violations of dignity, beginning with press articles that shed light on the violence done to those who are socially weakest in the established democracies of the Western world. It is frightening that such acts are so easily forgotten. The exclusion of the most disadvantaged is always a danger. Their physical and psychological integrity, their very lives, are at continual risk. Society is also at risk. Will society be able to include the weakest. In other words, will it ever be a cohesive society?

Patrice Meyer-Bisch's article firmly opposes the following idea: that progress must break down the conditions necessary for the dignity of some, leaving humanitarian efforts to try to restore them. This idea harks back to the argument that has always been put forward by ruling classes: that the present generation must sacrifice itself for the next one. In reality, this position most often justifies a lie: those in a position of weakness must sacrifice themselves to progress designed by others, and from which they will not benefit. Mr. Meyer-Bisch maintains that if we are determined to enable each person to contribute today to building the world of the future,
this will guarantee that we learn together how to treat all people as worthy human beings. This would be a truly civilised civilisation.