

Before society's 'invisibles'

"Me? What can I do for him?"

Interview with Luigi Butori

These experiences are part of the *Drop by Drop*¹ project. The project aims to help Karen refugees on the border between Thailand and Myanmar, lonely and abandoned persons in Ho Chi Minh City and malnourished children in Myanmar who survive on only "two eggs a week". Approximately 900 people are helped annually, and more than 10,000 persons in total have been aided since its inception ten years ago. The project, sustained by adults, families and groups in Italy, Switzerland and Austria, connects a thousand students and adults in a bridge of solidarity embracing both continents. Luigi Butori, an Italian focolarino who lived for several years in Asia, recounts this powerful story.

Luigi, in your work you encountered many people suffering in situations of poverty, illness and inequality. What state of mind and heart do you have when you are in front of these people?

*'For I resolved to know nothing while I was with you except Jesus Christ, and him crucified' (1 Cor 2:2). In this passage of Saint Paul -- among the most beautiful and important from his first Letter to the Corinthians -- he spoke and proclaimed Christ like no other. He proposed a model of evangelization, speaking of *weakness* and *fear*, and a message based on the Holy Spirit's manifestation, the one who "passes" through Christ, and him crucified.*

Jesus chose what was ugly, disgusting, separate and sinful – and transformed it into *positive*. Every time I turn toward the crucified Jesus that I encounter on the streets of my cities -- Yangon, Bangkok, Hi Chi Minh City -- I approach and draw near to God. I open my door to an utterly true encounter with him. This is because it is simple and unmediated. Concrete. This happened when I met Lek, homeless and psychologically unstable, who for decades has lived in a small temple near a golf club for the wealthy. Barely able to speak, he smiled upon seeing me, knowing I was bringing him water and a cold soda. Then he asks for biscuits and is happy with his nearly toothless grin. He has a bag on his head, wears rags and paints himself a red tint. On the street, they call him, "Red". They tell me, "That's your friend.", one of the 'trash' of Bangkok's super-consumer society. Yet those eyes spoke to me of Jesus.

Thailand, where you are now, has for many years been an arrival point for refugees from Myanmar who are trying to escape persecution. Are you also in contact with them?

The recent efforts of *Drop by Drop* have focused largely on the border between Thailand and Myanmar, in the refugee camps: The faces of many lack hope and are filled with sadness. Myanmar has known 70 years of civil war. Then, from 2015 to 2020, a few years of democratic hope. But, on February 1, 2021, the coup d'état was followed by unprecedented

violence. Today, we are back starting from scratch, as in 1962, which still means civil war for who knows how long. For refugees on the border with Thailand, it means further death, despair, and hunger.

We live an experience of sharing. Certainly, we give, and they receive. But, I receive the joy of living my vocation as a Christian (through giving) and encounter the face of Jesus in their faces. Many refugees work in corn plantations near the Myanmar border with the burning sun beating down on them. We share clothes, food, a word of comfort, milk, canned sardines, but, above all, our time or a pat on the back as a sign of care and affection. Ensuring that those who have experienced so much hatred can also feel love in their lives, is very important. I would say that it is fundamental.

Yet, that is where our credibility must come from: from Saint Paul talks about. Today he repeats it to me and to all of us: "I know only Christ and Him crucified". I know only Gaza and the tragedy of two million Palestinian refugees forced to live there, in the largest prison in the world; I know only the *Karen* refugees, the Balkan route; I know only the countless abortions, the trafficking of women to China and children sold in the slums to pedophiles. I know that Bo, the little girl of 14 years, who stands at the corner of the metro station near my house begging for money. She is beautiful and yet already "marked" deeply by life: her painted toenails, her scarred legs speak for themselves. She is also Jesus for me.

In Vietnam, too, you were in contact with many lonely, abandoned, elderly and sick people. Can you tell us something more about how this came about?

Again, I can share one episode. For days I could not sleep for thinking about the image of a mother in Long An, in the south of Saigon, holding her baby which suffered from macrocephalitis. "My God... it's really *you*," I said to myself. What must that woman be feeling right now? I realized I had to do something more, even if it was just that she will not feel abandoned. A few hours later, I tried to give her some additional help. Maybe it is just a little, but today in that mother's heart she could say: "Someone is thinking of me". As a follower of Christ, these are the experiences I am called to: Not to leave anyone feeling alone, to answer the cry of Jesus Crucified and Forsaken with my, 'here I am'.

Sometimes it is not easy to encounter suffering. What helped you and your friends not to stop, but rather to continue your travels to the outskirts and to the slums of the cities?

I can share some episodes. I entered a small alley at dusk with a friend who wanted to introduce me to a mother with four children and who had already had three husbands. She was currently without work and alone in caring for her family. We arrived bringing rice and anything else that could be useful for her and her children to survive. Her children were lively, mischievous and beautiful and I played with them. Suddenly, finding myself in front of the sadness and darkness in the woman's face, with her black eyes full of terror while trying to smile, I felt a jolt in my soul. A voice inside seemed to say to me, "It is me, look at me." It was Jesus that I saw, I am certain of that.

Then, the experience repeated itself in another way. A partially paralyzed 62-year-old gentleman had gradually been reduced to skin and bones. Going down "into the house" where he lived, one needed to be careful not to step on "something" on the floor: mice. In front of this bed-ridden man, who for years had abandoned the faith and the sacraments, we prayed together. He did not remember the Our Father. He only knew the Hail Mary. It is always her, this woman of Nazareth, who remains in the heart, especially in the hearts of

those who are most distant! I asked the gentleman for his blessing: I, younger in age, a foreigner, and in his eyes a rich foreigner. I raised his paralyzed hand and marked the cross on my head. He looked at me with eyes full of joy, surprise and tears. It then became a weekly appointment with him. Together we would say prayers that had resurfaced in his mind. He recited them in a loud voice. I found myself kneeling because it was the only possible position to be before him, before Jesus. I remember thinking, 'Here I am, Lord, I am on my knees before *you*'.

What does this experience of contact with the poor bring to your community?

My freedom, our freedom from worldliness, from the comfortable and secure life of many ecclesial communities lies in living that phrase of Saint Paul, in incarnating it in our lives. We know our comfortable life often distances us from Jesus, he who continues to drown in the cemetery of the Mediterranean Sea or be sold in an alleyway in Saigon. I ask myself those real questions: "What do I do for him?" Not 'what does the Church or my community do?', but: "What do I, myself, do? Let us ask St Paul for the personal grace and for our community that we may *know* more and more Christ and Christ crucified. The rest, as Paul said, "is rubbish" (Cf. *Phil* 3, 8). An act of pure love for him, present in those who wander our streets, wipes away the ocean of sins that we carelessly or consciously commit because Christian life is primarily a matter of love.

interview by Maria do Sameiro Freitas

¹ For more information: <https://gocciadopogoccia.ch/>