

## UNDERDEVELOPED CHRISTIANS

by Chiara Lubich

**There is a lot said about the Third World, and action is taken as well.** Yet hunger, lack of clothes and of housing, illiteracy, diseases and often the resulting immorality, still claim their victims in staggering proportions in many countries of the world.

**Modern means of communication have exposed these unfortunate wounds and we have all been shaken by them more or less deeply.** Pope Paul VI's encyclical letter *The Progress of Peoples* has been a clarion call, the voice of Christ in the twentieth century, giving encouragement to organizations, groups and individuals already involved in helping peoples on the way of development, and it invited the world to do more, much more: to commit itself to that very progress which today is synonymous with peace. In fact, much is being done and much will be done. But unfortunately, the results we hope for do not always turn out to be proportionate to the tremendous expenditure of energy and means. And this can be shown in a thousand ways. It is the proof of the words 'Man does not live by bread alone...'

**There is one thing that holds back or slows down the efforts of men** dedicated to acts of dutiful brotherly love for others. There is something we Christians must take into consideration, something we perhaps haven't yet done: a confession we should shout out, if we don't want to be hypocrites and look like hypocrites.

Is there a materially underdeveloped Third World? This is what we must take into consideration. Well then, there is also a Christianly, spiritually underdeveloped world.

The vast majority of us who follow Christ are really underdeveloped Christians.

### **Does this surprise us?**

Yet it is true. The statistics of the number of baptized Christians who do not go to church make us shudder. But we do not want to speak only of those who are non-practising or who have become atheists. No: we are talking about ourselves too, and about those who, like ourselves, are called 'the faithful', 'the churchgoers', or even 'good Christians'...

**What many saints considered a true Christian is amazing, if not dismaying.** Catherine of Siena, Teresa of Avila (who are both doctors of the Church), Thomas Aquinas and François de Sales, think that someone can only be spoken of as an authentic Christian, a fully actualized Christian, if he has achieved the full development of love. In fact, God's commandment, to love him with all our heart, with all our mind, is for all Christians.

After all, this conviction corresponds to the Master's often little understood words which were addressed to all: 'Be perfect as my Father is perfect.'

**Commenting on this command of Jesus and explaining François de Sales' conception** of the Christian life, Pope Pius XI remarked: 'No one should think that this precept is only addressed to a small number of chosen souls and that the others may keep to a lower level of virtue. It is evident that this law holds for absolutely every man without exception.'

**That tiny sac that appears on the flowering apple trees when the calyxes grow and the petals have fallen, can hardly be called an apple.** And when the apples have taken definite shape, but are still green and bitter, they await fresh sap and sunshine in order to be ready to fulfill the function they were created for, which is to nourish man. They still can not be called apples unless we say they are unripe apples. They are no use to man. If they fell they might be useful to animals.

**We Christians are the same.**

Until we are 'ripe' in our love, we cannot call ourselves Christians in the true sense of the word. At the very start we are Christians because we are baptized. Next we are, so to speak, developing Christians. But only when the life, the law and the holiness of Christ triumph in us, can we truly call ourselves Christians. This being the case it is not surprising that each one of us feels he is an 'underdeveloped' Christian.

**What ways, what means do we have to alleviate our spiritual situation? There is no shortage.**

The Church offers them to us in abundance since it teaches that if baptism entitles us to the name of Christian because we are incorporated into Christ, God's grace nevertheless requires our co-operation. We are often terribly undernourished, to such an extent that we don't feel hungry any more. And the Eucharist is there waiting for us, so that we can nourish ourselves. We are frightfully defenseless and exposed to all sorts of spiritual diseases and often infected by one or other of them. And the sacrament of penance is there to cure and strengthen us.

**We are naked and we could be clothed with Christ.**

We are homeless and even here on earth we could all be in the Father's warm house, in anticipation of heaven, if we lived in that mystical but true reality of being blood relations of Christ, and of one another; and if we rediscovered ourselves as brothers, and brought the family together again with the presence of Christ among us and the circulation of material and spiritual goods among us all. We wander like those who don't know where to go, while we have in our hands — it is enough to want it — the law of life, of every life, which is the Gospel.

We complain that today the priests are in crisis, and we are scandalized by some of their requests and we do not consider that the priest is generally the expression of the Christian Society to which he belongs.

The countries of the Third World are genuinely economically underdeveloped.

We Christians are stupidly underdeveloped because the possibilities of development are all around us, and yet we are in imminent danger of starvation, like King Midas surrounded by his gold.

**The problems of the Third World are very serious. What is needed is a massive transfer of goods, a restructuring, a major overhaul.**

And we do not know how to do all this.

We are not able to work out comprehensive plans for the whole world, not even in order to help it, because this would require a universal love.

**For this we must have the collaboration of the one who created this world, who knows its destinies,** and who penetrates the most hidden thoughts of men, their aspirations and the spiritual and material capacities of peoples. He who knows this humanity by direct experience also, he who sums up mankind because he is not just a man but Man: he alone can set alight in us a spirit and a universal vision of Love.

Pope John XXIII, for instance, told us we should measure the surplus we give to others by the extent of their need.

But who will measure the need of all our brothers except some one who has in himself the measure of mankind? Only Christ has this measure.

**And, in general, he wants to act in the world through Christians.** And he can do this with those in whom, filled with love, he fully lives and acts.

Then the plans they make will be illuminated by his wisdom and will be carried out despite all the difficulties.

**I think that if we really want to solve the problems of the Third World,** we have an urgent need to solve our own more serious problem, our being only faintly Christian.

**Going back to the earlier example — as the apple fulfills its function only when it is ripe,** the Christian is truly, decisively, adequately useful to mankind when he is ‘perfect like the Father’, because when he is perfect like the Father he is another Christ and, therefore, another ‘Son of Man’.

**This is wonderful because it means that only a true Christian can become a perfect man.**

But that is not enough. We have to draw out all the consequences. Authenticity, the characteristic of our times requires it: the perfect Christian is also a saint.

**So we must conclude that: in God’s eyes ‘man’, ‘Christian’, ‘saint’ are synonymous.**

‘Holiness ! That’s only a word,’ say many, very many people. No. Christ has not asked the impossible of us. And we must get rid of a certain notion of holiness that is prevalent among people. Phenomena, such as miracles, ecstasies and visions do not constitute holiness.

Holiness consists of perfect love. And today, when the masses are awakening — and this is a sign of the times — today also, when people must have brotherly relations with one another and every detail has to be seen from a world viewpoint, what is needed is a mass holiness, a communal holiness, a popular holiness.

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