

A Man 'at the Limits'

The life of Brother Ettore was a life at the limits. Many of those people who only saw him for a fleeting moment, when passing him, were almost scandalised by something in him and in his work. Others, very few in truth, remained near to him as he embraced often in a total way that unlikely life – we should say impossible life – to the point of sacrificing his own youth for what most people saw as madness. Many people, in the ecclesial world as well, commented on his mixture of devotion to Mary and his sharing with the least, with the confused dedication of a man who had lost his head... Many came to contest his activity which was seen as the activity of someone who, in welcoming and serving the last in that way, did not really make himself responsible for the transformation of society...

But the question that the life of Brother Ettore raised, and still raises, was very clear, indeed it is one that cannot be avoided: how is it possible to really share one's life with the lives of the last of this world without in our turn going 'beyond the limits'? Can one really throw open one's own door not worrying about whether a saint or a murderer will come in, without being a little mad? Can one wash an infected sore and not feel disgust without loving the person who has that sore, leaving aside human and social conditions of any kind?

A description of the difficult personality of this prophet of the last comes to us from a famous biography produced by one of his own religious brothers: 'Brother Ettore is stubborn as regards his ideas, unprejudiced in his choices, debatable in his methods. Fortunately enough, Providence gets him out of trouble every time (and this happens often) he takes a step too far, through donations, of a conspicuous character as well, which are for the most part anonymous and at times even more than what is required.. And in these cases Brother Ettore gives away the surplus for the needs of the world, from earthquake victims to the displaced people of Bosnia at war, so as to remain, as he was previously, without a penny in his pocket...' 'God's madman', as he is called, has a direct line to the good Lord: one needs only see how he prays and how he speaks to Him, even if some Milanese priests turn their nose at his liturgical style or his theological notions. His love for Our Lady also makes people talk and some people do not like him walking through Milan with a statue of the Virgin in his arms or stuck on the roof of his run-down car, or his protests at demonstrations in favour of abortion, his saying of prayers in squares or at the corners of streets'.

Paradoxically, the greatness of Brother Ettore was an inseparable part of his 'descent to hell', of his sharing with the 'buried of the earth', with those we still draw away from on trams and the underground when they themselves come near to us.

The welcoming of the other, the clothing of the naked, are not simple choices that allow our lives to carry on as if nothing had happened. To welcome a foreigner and clothe those who are naked requires us to get our hands dirty. Mercy for people who want to stay clean does not exist: sharing is always contamination.

The 'extreme' life of Brother Ettore reminds us of this: the bodies of the poor, of the last, of foreigners, are bodies that provoke us to make a choice: either we welcome them or we leave them on the threshold. There is, in truth, no third possibility.