How could solidarity and mutual aid be put into practice?

Last April, a meeting of the Administrative Committee took place, for the first time outside Europe, in Lima (Peru). The members of that Committee took advantage of their stay there to visit the Emmaus groups which rooted in a few South American countries. With their own eyes they were able to see these countries' reality. These visits have deeply marked all the representatives of European regions, and they certainly wondered how the Emmaus groups from rich countries will, in a hearty understanding, be able to improve their cooperation and to carry out durable exchanges with the other Emmaus groups in developing countries.

Questions too that concern young people and the "new poor".

Young people come to Emmaus, sometimes from necessity, or because, often, in a materialistic environment, they don't get a good answer to the questions they ask themselves. The traditional ideal aspirations proposed to them by family and society don't suit their experience nor what they see in daily life, nor what they feel or seek as being nearer the truth. We can prove then that over and above working to relieve near and distant destitution, and fighting to destroy its causes, Emmaus is a Movement where one is lead also to create a more positive propensity to share, not to dominate people around, and to enlighten public opinion about new ways of thinking, other ways of living, according to a new philosophy in time with the man of to-day.

The crisis we are met with, the ever increasing unemployment are at the origin of the larger number of the new poor who come and knock at Emmaus's door. How should we respond to them, and how can we help them to escape from the more or less vicious circle in which they are carried?

You all received a scheme of reflection to somehow guide your thinking and in consequence to facilitate this General Assembly. Thanks to all who sent us their suggestions. During these few days, either in a full meeting or in smaller parties, we shall state the true position and see how the Emmaus Movement lives now, examine how and up to what point the application of the Manifesto is fitting with the events of the moment, with the present situation of the countries where Emmaus is implanted. I rely on you all to have frank, open debates in a spirit of fraternity and mutual esteem. You know it well: the name Emmaus evokes our common conviction that love only can unite us and make us go ahead. Therefore it is in this frame of mind and with this certitude that I wish you a good and fruitful work so that at the end of this General Assembly each of us leaves this place with a new supply of ideas, of energy, of germ of Emmaus to be diffused in the place where we live and work in the service of others.

I want now to let Abbe PIERRE speak. We rejoice because in spite of his frail state of health he is present with us. He will be good enough to explain his views on the Emmaus Movement and his hopes for the future from what is existing now.

ABBE PIERRE'S ADDRESS

Several ones suggested, and I think it is a very good idea that we should open our session with a moment of silence, of meditation. We are here with very different beliefs, yesterday we heard that a Buddhist priest agreed to assume the responsibility of an Emmaus community in Asia, and among us there are persons with different types of faith or conception of life. So it is good for everyone to keep silent a minute or two, so that the best in ourselves could be available for this work. Let us be quiet for a moment.

We must study this interrogation: "Is Emmaus up-to-date?" It implies as precise as possible a reflection about Emmaus, to discern what is fundamental, and to consider in Emmaus all that never ceased, from the start, to adapt itself to the different countries and to developing situations. Therefore we must first know exactly what Emmaus is fundamentally, we must as well have the most realistic look over our time since we talk about present conditions.

I have been most impressed reading a book (the French will remember): a lot was said about it some years ago. It was a report on the present human condition as a whole, it was called "Mère et Mink report". They were two economists. One of them, Mink, published a book under the title "The future ahead". Reading it is extremely fruitful. The first sentence of this book is: "We are living through the first 'between-two-wars' which has not the war as an issue." I think that this is calling up one of the outstanding facts of the present human condition, because of the power of terror. And it is true that what traditionally was, through the millenaries, the issue of each serious crisis was war. It simplifies so many problems for the men in charge of the government: no more strikes, full employment, etc...many problems are solved.

Coming back after my last visit to the U.S.A., after listening to important, clever statesmen, I would tell all my friends "I am bringing back the certainty that if there were no reciprocal love, no reciprocal understanding, we would be involved in a war." America had not yet resumed its present enormous, and so precarious, economic boom; unemployment was increasing there too, and, on the Soviet side, splits were beginning to show in all the satellites empire. For one block as much as for the other, but for this dismay, the temptation to have recourse to war would have been terrible.

We are living in times when, for this reason, and also because the "universal man" began to exist, due to the instant communication of news from everywhere, we must become a "new man". If we were sitting at home watching TV and if an important drama took place on the other side of the earth, the show would be stopped and, by pictures sent on by satellites, we would see the event better than the people a hundred yards away from it. Remember the murder of Sadate. A new man must come to life, because from now on we are informed about everything and we know that the whole human family has in its hands economic powers which would permit an easy solution for every social and economic problem, if a crazy percentage of the world resources were not squandered. I am convinced that it is caused more by a reciprocal fear than by ambition to dominate. The ambition to dominate does exist, but I am convinced that more than half the incentives which lead to that madness lie in fear. Is it not madness for the the East as well as for the West to squander such an amount of wealth to produce things of which the best that can happen is that they should never be used? Why isn't it better to put energy on any one of these two things that are lacking? Why not construct anything? That fear of constructing anything? That fear of constructing anything that is needed? Who knows as well that with the energies which enable such terrors it could also remove salt from sea water, irrigate deserts, collect the fantastic masses of water from Himalaya which repeatedly swamp with dramatic floods the
regions around the delta, leaving large deserts, without water, the fertile lands of India. For all that, we have means that would cost less than the expenses for armament. Yes, it is a time when really a 'new man' must take a start. Human relations can no longer find a solution for their conflicts in war, as they did traditionally as far as we can go back into the history. In them a new philosophy would establish itself. Together if there is any attempt to approach unity by the victory of a dominator, all the experts say so: the self-destruction of mankind is no longer an unlikely utopia: it is quite possible and it is threatening us. Then men are bound to find some other way.

I'll tell directly what I am going to try and analyze with you all, making an attempt to be as concise as possible but to make as clear as I can what appears to me as fundamental.

I won't start with what concerns the so-called under-developed countries, this will be my second point, and the third will consider Emans and its adaptations.

I'll first talk about countries which, until the last few years, in contrast with the under-developed ones, were called 'developed': all European countries and many others through the world. It is very important that we should be conscious of what we eat everyday called 'the crisis' for this part of the world that yesterday was privileged. We must be fully conscious of the fact that this state of things, with all it involves, that is called 'crisis' will last long. Around us, we must expel the foolish idea, which could only drive us to despair, that it is going to be a short time, a moment. We must not believe the sayings of so many politicians of political parties saying: "With my political platform, with such and such leader, the crisis will soon be over." It is not true.

Whoever may be in power in our countries with a democratic vote, the causes of the crisis will last long, maybe for several generations. We have no idea of the privileges of the situation we were in, we who live now. Our development went at a fantastic speed. Many of you are not yet 40, but those who are 60 and have known the "before the war" period know well that for our European countries the evolution has been fantastic. At the end of the 1965 war, if we had been told that any worker who had a regular salary could have TV, that his son would be able to buy a very expensive motor-bike, and so on, we would have said: "It is unthinkible." Well it is largely the result of the present day powerful nations have been using for a long while all kinds of material, constrained underpaid work, plunder of power, cheap oil for which we charged our own price. We have been able to attain to a comfortable life, in a quick, extremely rapid way, and to get amenities of life we are now accustomed to.

We must know (I don't know what word to use) the humiliating tragedy for countless fathers of a family in our countries, and not only in the distress of shanty towns, who are down to nothing in spite of social laws allowing then for some long or short time to a minimum level of subsistence. What a degradation for the family man who can feed his wife and children under of raw materials, constrained underpaid work, plunder of power, cheap oil for which we charged our own price. We have been able to attain to a comfortable life, in a quick, extremely rapid way, and to get amenities of life we are now accustomed to.

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Now you must know it. Last year, for the city of Paris, and (there must have been similar initiatives in towns elsewhere,) the Salvation Army and Emmaus shared out the outskirts of Paris and organized every night in the streets a distribution of soup. I forget the figures, but some nights a thousand meals were given to homeless people who came to eat soup along the streets. In Paris are not beggars: half of them were men wearing a tie who had been and tried to keep being "gentlemen", that is to say persons who had had an average normal status, they did not want to accept conditions the tied with their complete amount of unemployment indemnity, and they had hardly enough money to feed their family: knowing that soup was being given out in the street they shamelessly affected to dine out to leave more food for the children, and they came to eat soup in the streets, the in Paris. Not in Lima or Calcutta, you see, but in Paris. One must know that and feel hurt by it. And this is only a start, it might increase. We have known of suicides, more might happen and we know the dreadful psychological condition of youth. Previously and by studying history I knew that if they passed an exam, succeed at a competition, a professional diploma, they would have a proper normal life. To-day they see their father, their uncle, their brother who with their diplomas, their capacities, are idle. How could they find enough courage to work in an exam or a competition? What for? they are deserted, they doubt of everything.

We must also be conscious of another reality: what have they come to, these people that are thought to be "great" on earth, the two main posts: the Soviet world with its satellites, and the western world with first the U.S.A.?

As far as the Soviet world is concerned, we are not living there, we don't know all about it, however we have some information and we can understand some facts through friends who had to go there, who have been able to have talks and to become aware in spite of the fear that they are being listened to by the Police. Through these testimonies, one can understand that, if in the highest charges of the state they only employ old men, it is because the 50-60 year genealogical line does not belong to the professional strata, neither in the police. The economic doctrine of the Party as absolute. Some elements of the traditional Marxist analysis are quite good and they will remain in science but as a whole system, men of forty don't believe in it anymore. And you have examples at a spiritual point of view, the young people, although at school they are taught the historical materialist atheism, etc... come more and more to their grandparents to ask: for you what was religion? Is it obvious that there is a questioning, and certainly a fear among the country's directing board, facing Poland's behaviour, Rumania's behaviour, a behaviour that is beginning to appear in Eastern Germany. They certainly feel an instability that frightens them. Apart from the Army and the Police endowed with tremendous priviliges, and who will always obey those who detain power, the people, the mob does not believe in it any longer.

As far as the West is concerned, three days ago an extraordinary event took place. For me, this event is a symbol and it marks an historical date equivalent to what has been taking by the Nasser of the Suez canal: Nasser with a laugh, a nation looked upon as powerless taking the canal, England and France mobilizing with their powerful armies, then a fortnight later, under a pressure from the U.S.A., withdrawing saying: "Excuse us, we won't do it again and we accept". The event is the fact that the 10 nations of the European Economic Community, plus Spain, Portugal and the United States of America, the 12 of the Community of Latin America, San José in Costa Rica to take part to the meeting of what is called "the Contadora group". This Contadora group is made up with representatives from the North of South America and they are attempting to define a global plan enabling a hope for peace in Central America. And, for the first time, a group never seen before, unanimous, that is to say not only socialist and left-wing governments (Mrs Thatcher is not especially a left wing extremist) unanimous, the Foreign Ministers rejected the request of rejection of this plan addresssed to them by the U.S. Foreign Affairs Minister and they made common cause with the Contadora group, committing themselves to back the scheme they were...
Of course, the European nations won't be able to supply as much money as the U.S. thought they had, but it is an extraordinary fact that Europe should take unanimously such a position precisely to try and give peace a chance of existing another way than by defeat, under another domineering country's rule. If the U.S.A. wanted it, they could have recourse to force, although they did not and American public opinion is not ready to let American armed forces be engaged on the South American continent or in Central America. The American people are not at all sure that it would not be another Vietnam, with the situation having to withdraw having obtained nothing. We would have a clear view of that. To end up with these parts of the world till now said to be developed, I'll take two observations. One is that the prodigious and scandalous jumo of the U.S.A. which of all a sudden stopped there an important part of creating lots of jobs and receiving foreign friends finding that world because their rate of interest were so high, has only been possible, be aware of it, because Mr. Reagan, as soon as he got the power within a few hours withdrew three quarters of the social credit; David Kird in charge of Emmaus Harlem must tell us about it.

In the district where the Community is living, out-patients clinics have closed down, credit for the street educators have been withdrawn, only one hospital is left for scores of millions of inhabitants. Savings have been realized on the social level and these funds have been put in 'business', forsaking American poverty. Yet otherwise are populations less numerous but in the conurbations in New York suburbs as in Calcutta. The number is smaller but the dreadful conditions of family life, of human life are the same. That is what I have seen in the house, the old Emmaus-Harlem house.

Yes, we must not be deceived: this fantastic recovery which is at the moment ruining all the nation as petrol is being paid in dollars, is a total capitulation getting the weakest. All the nations who have no petrol, we think of African nations who did not find any petrol and who need it to exist, to develop, for the circulation of the products, they must pay for it dearer and dearer and the same is true for us, for the same price for our economic power already established, we can manage to get over it, but we also find ourselves in even more difficult situation because of that sudden triumph of the U.S. It will not last. A time will come when it will break down, as it was created. For the war, as for the war before, as for the war before before.

As for the others, we Europeans—and I end up with the privileged countries—let us be conscious of three realities: we are one generation and several generations condemned to peace, there will not be a possibility of a general war, none will come, yes, but a general war, nobody will be able to have recourse to a remedy to his own difficulties.

Then, we are condemned to sharing out, whatever becomes Prime Minister. We can no longer go on without sharing the first wealth that is employment. It is impossible to have a quarter of the able-bodied, very healthy men, hanging about along the streets while three quarters have their normal work; it will be unbearable, there will be disturbances to require (whether the left or the right is in power) the sharing of the first treasure: employment. It will be of necessity—whatever is in power—it will be of necessity to share the income from the employment because how would it be possible, if it is half-time work, to pay up two complete salaries for one day? There would be no possible export and it would be another type of ruin for the country.

Yes we are compelled to share the job as well as the income from it.

Finally, we are generations condemned to free time, and this will be either a wonderful or an awful possibility. And there everything is resting with us.

The free time, either it will become human degradation, loitering from pub to pub, in the boredom and that will be degradation, or, free time can be a resurrection, maybe to live again, because we had become slaves; at the time that was called growth, economic miracle, the 30 or 40 years of pa-re...
Thirdly, let us see and not be gullied by ideologies. We have more than an ideology in what we are living in Emmaus. I don’t know how to call it, we could talk about a ‘mystic of the meaning of life’ that is to say we have an intuition that is profound than values that the party organs of a political party can develop. Political parties are necessary, lawful, indispensable but they cannot create the “new man” I talked about at the beginning.

Founding the “new man” who has become indispensable for mankind’ survival does absolutely surpass all that parties can do. At first it is a question of conveying love in the innermost of hearts. If it is not so, we have seen what it means to be a Jew in Russia. At the cost of much suffering for the feeble ones and of the alienation of freedom, a soviet aristocracy has set up absolutely comparable to the Tsars’ aristocracy with its sons of the rich, of the leading people, just like before, and the young people have lost confidence in that ideology and that method of government.

All the structures (let us be careful when we use the word ‘structures’ it is not true to say party condition even if it is not sure that they can change down to the heart) all structures get corrupted if they don’t have a soul, an inward animation. We’ll have to modify Emmaus’s structures in the years to come. We’ll discuss it, we already much worked on the subject at the Administrative Committee. But don’t let us delude ourselves, it is not the improvement of our structures that will give more efficiency to the service of the present mankind because all structures rot, if the men who live through them are not ‘other men’. It is from the inside that something bad will emerge. Another point, people talk, they often remind us: don’t forget what Abbé Pierre said: ‘help immediately, fight against the causes’. And frequently, as they talk, people seem to mean that we, absorbed every day in the mundane, in working, we should stop searching for the causes of disease and train the mind. It is not so. The causes have been known for a long time. The search is made, we are living through it everyday in our Emmaus life. What is important, is to find the answer to the ways of the causes. But don’t forget that we are meant to become a great institute of scientists in economy and politics who can advance in the knowledge of the causes of evil in the world.

These causes are largely known, if one wants really to take the trouble to know them. What does matter is to find a way to change them away.

I am ending up by saying a word about Emmaus International and eventual improvements of its statutes. We are going to talk about it over here. The Administrative Committee and Executive Committee have worked hard on it, and after a trying day, we finally decided wisely, I think, to call for the Executive Committee that was until the next Administrative Committee, to work about 18 months, as usual. We’ll have to entrust a limited committee, taken among the members of the Administrative Committee, and ready to take advice from others, to prepare for the next Administrative Committee meeting alterations in the statutes, that may be justified, although we should avoid dreaming and saying: we are going to set a perfect Executive Committee because an Asiatic, a South American, a Scandivian will sit in it. This would mean that they could never work because they would never meet all together. A definite concrete solution will have to be found. Think about it here during our three day meeting.

Whatever the reforms of structures may be, I entreat you, don’t leave this meeting without, I should say dramatically being conscious of the fact that all politics, and politics inside Emmaus always end up with a budget, sums, whichever scheme of action selected. Now, it is obvious that modifications of structures increase the charges for the international secretariat and for the Executive Committee, it is strictly necessary for all those who can pay their subscription. Groups which are not poor have never paid any subscription yet. Some very nice groups can pay only a symbolic subscription. But everyone must consider that it is a serious duty and that waiting would be absurd. ...