



Photo by Gerard Straub

## Culture Watch

### Where There is Despair...

**The incarnational work of filmmaker Gerard Straub.**  
*by Helene Slessor-Jamir*

It's a long way from Hollywood to the slums of Brazil, Peru, and the Philippines. But filmmaker Gerard Straub traded producing television shows, including the successful soap operas *General Hospital* and *The Doctors*, for a far more fulfilling life among the poorest of the poor.

During a recent visit to Wheaton College to premiere a rough version of his latest documentary, *Poverty and Prayer*, this thoughtful 58-year-old Californian told students about how his conversion gradually led him to a deep understanding of Christ's love for the poor. He's made six films, each of which is filled with graphic images of global poverty in Brazil, Mexico, Peru, El Salvador, India, Jamaica, the Philippines, Kenya, and the United States. His journeys have exposed him to poverty on a scale he had never imagined, and some of the most dramatic segments in his films are of those who live on garbage dumps in the Philippines, Jamaica, and Mexico, earning their livelihood by picking through other people's waste. They are the poorest of the poor, and, as Straub reminds his listeners, "scripture tells us that to forget the poor is to forget God."

His films - part documentary and part spiritual reflection - are designed to be challenging, to make people think and to reflect on their own lives. "I want you to see Jesus in the distressing disguise of the poor," Straub says. "Global poverty is the result of selfishness that stems from a lack of authentic love of God and of our neighbor." For Straub, setting oneself as higher than others is a form of blasphemy, and consuming more than we need is a form of stealing. "Justice requires that people have a place to sleep, enough food to eat, and work that makes them feel worthwhile," he says.

This message, delivered in Straub's quiet, thoughtful manner, resonates among his audiences. "My films are demanding, yet people are watching them and being transformed," he says.

Straub takes an incarnational approach to each of his films by building relationships with those he hopes to film. For *Endless Exodus*, his film about undocumented migrants, he spent a week living with one of the families in El Salvador whose story he tells. "I don't want to take pictures," says Straub. "I want to *receive* pictures, so I try to enter into some kind of relationship." In that film he tells the tragic story of Moses, a small Salvadoran boy who suffers from an incurable disease that has left his little body covered with scabs. "All the suffering in the world is for me embodied in this one small, fragile boy. Moses is, without a doubt, the saddest person I have ever seen," Straub says. The story of Moses humanizes the suffering of the poor in villages throughout Central America that forces many of them to make the dangerous journey to the United States in search of work.

We're introduced to Loretta in *Rescue Me*, a film about the estimated 10,000 homeless people living on Los Angeles' skid row. When Straub first meets her, she has only recently become homeless and is still filled with hope. Nine months later, she is visibly beaten down from the hardships of life on the streets, yet still speaks of her desire to find work. This personal encounter allows us to see how homelessness takes its toll on those who are forced to live in cardboard boxes on the sidewalk.

Stylistically, Straub's films are unique, unlike what one might expect in documentaries about poverty. He effectively combines color video with black-and-white photographs, eight-millimeter black-and-white film, and video footage shot in sepia tone. Quotes from spiritual luminaries such as Dorothy Day, Thich Nhat Hanh, Abraham Joshua Heschel, Martin Luther King Jr., Jean Vanier, and St. Francis are sprinkled throughout the images. The films are surprisingly artistic and focus on gentle moments of human dignity and not merely on human suffering. Joe Ferullo, a senior producer at NBC News, said, "Gerry has an astounding ability to get close to strange people in strange lands, speaking a language he does not know. His filmmaker's eye for the perfect bit of detail, the just-right moment to capture someone's face - filled with hope or disappointment, courage or fear - delivers power in every frame. He approaches the people he meets with dignity, and records that dignity for us."

STRAUB'S WORK is the outgrowth of his spiritual pilgrimage, which led him from the Catholic faith of his childhood, through atheism, and back to faith through a profound encounter with Christ. After he became disillusioned with television production, he turned to writing and started work on a novel whose main character was in love with St. Francis of Assisi and Vincent van Gogh. He eventually traveled to Rome. On his first day there, he wandered into an empty church and, picking up a prayer book, randomly turned to Psalm 63, which the text summarized as "a soul thirsting for God." As he read the verses, something mysterious began to happen. "I found myself overtaken by a sense of peace," Straub says, "which sprang from the sudden realization that God does exist, and moreover, does love me." He wrote about his return to faith in his book *The Sun and Moon Over Assisi*.

Not long after, Straub started the San Damiano Foundation, located in Burbank, California, to produce films for charitable organizations that serve the poor, giving them a powerful fundraising tool to ensure their survival. His film on a leper colony in Brazil, for example, was made to raise funds for Amazon Relief, and *Rescue Me* was made to support the Union Rescue Mission in Los Angeles. And Straub still receives donations for Moses, of *Endless Exodus*, which are sent to the boy's mother. The foundation ([www.sandamianofoundation.org](http://www.sandamianofoundation.org)) has sold more than 3,000 copies of his films - without any advertising. Many of the requests come from churches who intend to show the films to larger audiences.

To make these films, Straub has become a beggar himself. "I now live out of a radical dependency on God," he says. Earlier this year, when he went to Peru to shoot footage for his current film about a doctor who has dedicated his life to caring for chronically ill children, he had \$1,000 in the bank, just enough to buy the plane ticket. Although a recent wave of media attention has resulted in increased interest and financial support for his work, raising funds is an ongoing challenge.

But you can be sure the focus of his next film - and the one after that - will remind us that God is at home among the poor, and that Straub's ability to tell a story, to make the poor real people, will shine through.

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