

THE OPTION FOR THE POOR ARISES FROM FAITH IN CHRIST

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The author argues that the preferential option for the poor (1) constitutes a part of following Jesus that gives ultimate meaning to human existence and thus gives believers “reason to hope”; and (2) helps us understand faith in terms of a hermeneutics of hope, an interpretation that must be constantly enacted and reenacted throughout our lives and human history.

IN MAY 2007 the Fifth General Conference of the bishops of Latin America and the Caribbean took place in Aparecida, Brazil. The meeting explicitly and insistently situated itself within the pastoral and theological framework opened up during the years of the Second Vatican Council and the bishops’ Second General Conference at Medellín, Colombia (1968). Aparecida makes the preferential option for the poor, which it considers “one of the characteristic features of the face of the Latin American and Caribbean Church,” one of the central axes of its conclusions.¹

The presence of this commitment at Aparecida owes much to the emphasis Pope Benedict XVI put on the subject in his speech at the conference. He clearly and firmly located his remarks in the appropriate theological context: “the preferential option for the poor is implicit in the Christological faith in the God who became poor for us, so as to enrich

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¹ V Conferencia General del Episcopado Latinoamericano y del Caribe, May 13–31, 2007, Aparecida, Brazil, Documento de Aparecida no. 391, http://www.usccb.org/latinamerica/english/Documento_Conclusivo_Aparecida.pdf (accessed March 24, 2009).

us with his poverty (cf. 2 Cor 8:9).”² Its root is faith in Christ, which Aparecida lucidly reiterates: “This commitment is born out of our faith in Jesus Christ, the God who became human.”³

The vision of Christian life manifested in this statement and in the practice of this commitment is, in fact, the most substantial part of the contribution from the life and theological reflection of the Church in Latin America to the universal church. The option for the poor took its first steps in the years before Medellín, was affirmed in the period after that conference, and was invoked in subsequent episcopal conferences and in the recent teachings of Benedict XVI and Aparecida, which have given it an impact and a place it would not have had without them.

The option for the poor is not limited to the assignment of pastoral workers to areas where the poor are found. While it is good to see greater pastoral investment in areas of poverty, the option for the poor is more global and demanding. Some years ago Gregory Baum described it as “the contemporary form of discipleship.”⁴ Here I would like to present some points with respect to a perspective that goes to the marrow of Christian life. The option for the poor is deployed in three arenas: the following of Jesus, theological work, and the proclamation of the gospel. These three dimensions give the preferential option for the poor vitality and shape.

This option involves a commitment that implies leaving the road one is on, as the parable of the Good Samaritan teaches, and entering the world of the other, of the “insignificant” person, of the one excluded from dominant social sectors, communities, viewpoints, and ideas. It is a long and difficult, but necessary, process, and a precondition for authenticity. The priority of the other is a distinguishing mark of a gospel ethic, and nobody embodies this priority more clearly than the poor and the excluded. A poem by Antonio Machado speaks to us about this otherness:

Christ teaches: your neighbor
you will love as yourself,
but never forget that they are an other.⁵

² Pope Benedict XVI, Address of His Holiness Benedict XVI to the Bishops of Latin America and the Caribbean, Shrine of Aparecida, May 13, 2007, no. 3, http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/benedict_xvi/speeches/2007/may/documents/hf_ben-xvi_spe_20070513_conference-aparecida_en.html (accessed March 24, 2009).

³ Documento de Aparecida no. 392.

⁴ Gregory Baum, *Essays in Critical Theology* (Kansas City: Sheed & Ward, 1994) 67.

⁵ Antonio Machado, “Campos de Castilla” (Proverbios y cantares XLII), *Poesías Completas* (Madrid: Espasa-Calpe, 1979) 273.

FOLLOWING JESUS

To be a Christian is to walk, moved by the Spirit, in the footsteps of Jesus. Traditionally known as *la sequela Christi*, this kind of discipleship is the root and the ultimate meaning of the preferential option for the poor.

This commitment—the expression “preferential option for the poor” is recent but its content is biblical—is an essential component of discipleship. At its core is a spiritual experience of the mystery of God who is, according to Meister Eckhart, both the “unnamable” and the “omni-namable” one. Eckhart had to reach this point in order to capture the deeper meaning of this commitment to the absent and anonymous of history. The free and demanding love of God is expressed in the commandment of Jesus to “Love one another as I have loved you” (Jn 13:34). This implies a universal love that excludes no one, and at the same time a priority for the least ones of history, the oppressed and the insignificant. Simultaneously living out universality and preference reveals the God of love and makes present the mystery hidden for all time but now unveiled: as Paul says, the proclamation of Jesus as the Christ (see Rom 16:25–26). This is what the preferential option for the poor points to: walking with Jesus the Messiah.⁶

For this reason, Puebla reminds us that “the service of the poor is the privileged, though not exclusive, means for following Christ.”⁷ The lived experiences of many Christians undertaking different journeys in solidarity with the marginalized and insignificant of history have revealed that the irruption of the poor—their new presence on the historical scene—signifies a true irruption of God into our lives.

Saying this does not deprive the poor of the historical flesh of their suffering. Nor does it deprive them of the human, social, and cultural substance of their cry for justice. It is not a short-sighted “spiritualization” that forgets their human dimensions. Rather, it makes us truly see what is at stake, according to the Bible, in the commitment to one’s neighbor. Precisely because we so value and respect the density of the historical event of the irruption of the poor, we are positioned to make a faith-based interpretation of this event. It is worth saying: we understand the irruption of the poor as a sign of the times, which we must scrutinize in the light of faith in order to discern the challenge of the God who has pitched his tent

⁶ The source for this position is biblical, but the immediate reference is the well-known phrase of John XXIII: “the church of all, and particularly the church of the poor” (John XXIII, “Radio message to all the Christian faithful one month before the opening of the Second Vatican Ecumenical Council” [September 11, 1962], http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_xxiii/speeches/1962/documents/hf_j-xxiii_spe_19620911_ecumenical-council_it.html [accessed March 24, 2009]).

⁷ III Conferencia General del Episcopado Latinoamericano, January 28, 1979, Documento de Puebla no. 1146, www.uca.edu.ar/esp/sec-pec/esp/docs-celam/pdf/puebla.pdf (accessed March 24, 2009).

among us (Jn 1:14). Solidarity with the poor is the source of a spirituality, of a collective—or communal, if one prefers—journey toward God. This journey takes place in a history that the inhuman situation of the poor exposes in all its cruelty, but that also allows its possibilities and hopes to be discovered.

Following Jesus is a response to the question about the meaning of human existence; it is a global vision of our life, but it also affects life's small and everyday aspects. Discipleship allows us to see our lives in relation to the will of God and sets goals for us to strive for and realize through a daily relationship with the Lord, which implies relationships with other persons. Spirituality comes into being on the terrain of Christian practice: thanksgiving, prayer, and a commitment in history to solidarity, especially with the poorest. Contemplation and solidarity are two sides of a practice inspired by a global sense of human existence that is a source of hope and joy.

The deepest meaning of the commitment to the poor is the encounter with Christ. Echoing Matthew's pericope of the last judgment, Puebla invites us to recognize in the face of the poor "the suffering features of the face of Christ the Lord who questions and implores us."⁸ This discovery calls us to personal and ecclesial conversion. Matthew's text is, without a doubt, central to Christian spirituality and provides us with a fundamental principle for discerning and finding the road of fidelity to Jesus.

In one of his homilies Archbishop Romero observed: "There is a criterion for knowing whether God is close to us or far away: all those who worry about the hungry, the naked, the poor, the disappeared, the tortured, the imprisoned—about any suffering human being—are close to God" (February 5, 1978).⁹ The gesture made toward the other determines the proximity to or distance from God, and makes us understand the "why" of this judgment and the meaning of the term "spiritual" in a Gospel context. "Love of God and love of neighbor have become one," says Pope Benedict in his encyclical *Deus caritas est*.¹⁰ The identification of Christ with the poor leads us by the hand to see the fundamental unity of these two loves and makes demands on his followers. The rejection of injustice and the oppression it presupposes is anchored in faith in the God of life. This commitment has been sealed by the blood of those who, as Archbishop Romero said

⁸ Ibid. no. 31.

⁹ Archbishop Oscar Romero, "La Iglesia cuya debilidad se apoya en Cristo: Quinto domingo del tiempo ordinario, 5 de febrero de 1978. Isaías 58: 7–10, 1 Corintios 1:1–5, Mateo 5: 13–16," *La palabra viva de Monseñor Romero* (Koinonía), <http://servicioskoinonia.org/romero/homilias/A/780205.htm> (accessed April 7, 2009).

¹⁰ Benedict XVI, *Deus caritas est* no. 15, http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/benedict_xvi/encyclicals/documents/hf_ben-xvi_enc_20051225_deus-caritas-est_en.html (accessed March 24, 2009).

(and this was true in his own case), died under “the sign of martyrdom.” Aparecida has movingly recognized the testimony of these Christians, referring to “the courageous witness of our men and women saints, and of those who, though not yet canonized, have radically lived the gospel and have offered their lives for Christ, for the Church, and for their people.”¹¹

The option for the poor is a key part of a spirituality that refuses to be a kind of oasis or, still less, an escape or a refuge in difficult times. At the same time it involves a walking with Jesus that, without being disconnected from reality and without distancing itself from the narrow paths trod by the poor, helps us keep alive our trust in the Lord and preserve our serenity when the storm gets worse.

A HERMENEUTICS OF HOPE

If the following of Jesus is marked by the preferential option for the poor, so is the understanding of the faith that unfolds from these experiences and emergencies.¹² This is the second dimension of the option for the poor that that I would like to highlight.

Faith is a grace; theology is an understanding of this gift. Theology tries to say a word about the mysterious and ineffable reality that we believers call God. It is a *logos* about *theos*. Faith is the ultimate source of theological reflection, giving theology its specificity and delimiting its territory. Its purpose is—or should be—to contribute to making the gospel present in human history through Christian testimony. A theology that is not nourished by walking Jesus’ own path loses its bearings. Those we call Fathers of the Church, for whom all theology was spiritual theology, understood this very well.

On the other hand, neither the faith nor the reflection about how the faith is being lived in community is simply an individual task. This fact makes discourse on faith a labor that is related to the preaching of the gospel, a task that gives this community its *raison d’être*. Every discourse on faith is born at a precise time and place and tries to respond to historical situations and questions amidst which Christians live and proclaim the gospel. For that reason it is tautological, strictly speaking, to say that a theology is contextual, for all theology is contextual in one way or another. Some theologies, however, take their context seriously and recognize it; others do not.

¹¹ Documento de Aparecida no. 98.

¹² A few decades ago Marie-Dominique Chenu accurately stated, “Finally, theological systems are nothing but an expression of spiritualities” (Marie-Dominique Chenu, *Le Saulchoir: Une école de théologie* [Etiolles, France: Le Saulchoir, 1937]). Spirituality is, in effect, the key unifying force of theology.

The theology of liberation, like other reflections on the Christian message that arise from the world of those considered socially insignificant, postulates that discourse on faith must recognize and emphasize its relationship with human history and people's everyday lives, especially the challenge of poverty manifested there. This relationship with history and the challenge of poverty implies an important change in the task of theology. While we have long pigeonholed poverty as a social issue, our perception of poverty is now deeper and more complex, and no longer limited to its economic dimension (as important as this may be). Instead, we now understand that being poor means being rendered socially insignificant due to ethnic, cultural, gender, and/or economic factors. Poverty's inhumane and antievangelical character, as Medellín and Puebla put it, and its final outcome of early and unjust death make it totally clear that poverty goes beyond the socioeconomic sphere to become a global human problem and therefore a challenge to living and preaching the gospel. Poverty thereby becomes a theological question, and the option for the poor makes us aware of it and provides a way to think about the issue.

Like all challenges to faith, the condition of the poor questions and interrogates while at the same time providing principles and categories that open up new approaches to understanding and deepening the Christian message. It is critical to consider the counterpart and the other side of every question. Theological work consists of confronting challenges face-to-face, no matter how radical they may be, recognizing the signs of the times that contain them, and discerning in them, by the light of faith, the new field of faith interpretation being presented; thus will our thinking about the faith and our speech about God speak to the people of our age.

From this perspective, the preferential option for the poor plays an important role in theological reflection. As is stated in the classic formula *fides quaerens intellectum*, theology is faith seeking understanding. Given that faith "operates through charity" (Gal 5:6), theology is a reflection that tries to accompany a people in their sufferings and joys, their commitments, frustrations, and hopes, both in becoming aware of the social universe in which they live and in their determination to understand better their own cultural tradition. A theological language that neglects unjust suffering and does not loudly proclaim the right of each and every person to happiness remains shallow and betrays the God of whom it speaks, the God of the beatitudes.

In the end, theology—all theology—is a hermeneutics of hope, an understanding of the reasons we have to hope. Hope is, in the first place, a gift from God. Accepting that gift opens followers of Jesus to the future and to trust. Seeing theological work as an attempt to understand the reasons for hope becomes more demanding when it begins with the situation of the poor and continues in solidarity with them. God's gift is not an easy hope. But as fragile as it may seem, it is capable of planting roots in

the world of social insignificance, in the world of the poor, and of breaking out and remaining creative and alive even in the midst of difficult situations. Nonetheless, hoping is not waiting; rather it should lead us actively to resolve to forge reasons for hope.

Paul Ricoeur says that theology is born at the intersection of “a space of experience” and “a horizon of hope.” It is a space where Jesus invites us to follow him in encountering the other, especially the “smallest” of his brothers and sisters—and to follow him in the hope that in this encounter, which is open to every person, believer or unbeliever, we will stand within the horizon of service to the other and in communion with the Lord.

A PROPHETIC ANNOUNCEMENT OF THE GOOD NEWS

The preferential option for the poor that grounds theological attempts to forge reasons for hope is also an essential component of the prophetic proclamation of the gospel, a proclamation that includes the connection between justice and God’s gratuitous love. Working so that the excluded might become agents of their own destiny is an important part of this proclamation.

We cannot enter into the world of the poor, who live in an inhumane situation of exclusion, without becoming aware of the liberating and humanizing dimension of the good news. And for that very reason we cannot fail to hear the gospel’s cry for justice as well as for equality among all human beings. This is a core theme in the prophetic tradition of the First Testament, which we meet again in the middle of the Sermon on the Mount as a command summarizing and giving meaning to the life of the believer: “seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness” (Mt 6:33).

The heart of Jesus’ message is the proclamation of the love of God that is expressed in the proclamation of his kingdom. The kingdom is the final meaning of history; its total fulfillment takes place beyond history, and at the same time it is present from this moment on. The Gospels speak to us precisely of its closeness to us today. The parables of the kingdom point to a kingdom that is “already” present but “not yet” fully realized. For this reason the kingdom of God manifests itself as a gift, a grace, but also as a task, a responsibility.

The life of the disciple of Jesus is situated within the framework of the sometimes tense but always fertile relationship between free gift and historical commitment; thus our talk about the kingdom we accept in faith is situated within the same framework. The passage from the beatitudes of Matthew contains a promise of the kingdom to all who, upon accepting in their daily lives the free gift offered to them, become Jesus’ disciples. In the Gospels the kingdom is discussed through expressions and images of great biblical richness: land, consolation, thirst, mercy, the vision of God,

and divine filiation. The dominant theme of these images is life, life in all its aspects. As for the requirements of discipleship, they are stated fundamentally in the first and most critical blessing: being poor in spirit. The other blessings offer variations and shades of the first. Disciples are those who make the promise of the kingdom their own, placing their lives in God's hands. Recognizing the gift of the kingdom sets them free vis-à-vis all other goods. And it opens them up to the mission of evangelization, which is linked to "remembering the poor" (Gal 2:10), according to the advice Paul received in Jerusalem.

Theological thinking in recent decades, as well as various texts of the magisterium, has insisted upon the relationship between evangelization and the promotion of justice. Examples include the Medellín conference, the Roman Synod of 1971, *Evangelii nuntiandi* by Paul VI, and a number of speeches by John Paul II. One can see in these documents an orientation toward these two aspects that is increasingly global and unitary.

The promotion of justice is seen more and more as an essential part of proclaiming the gospel. Such promotion is, of course, not all there is to evangelization, but neither is it situated only on the threshold of the proclamation of the good news, for it is not preevangelization as was once held. Rather, it constitutes an essential part of the proclamation of the kingdom, even though it does not exhaust its content. The road has been long, but its current formulation clearly avoids impoverishing separations as well as possible confusions of the two. Benedict XVI, in a text cited by the Aparecida conference, stated that "evangelization has always been joined to human promotion and authentic Christian liberation."¹³

In addition, solidarity with the poor also sets forth a fundamental demand: the recognition of the full human dignity of the poor and their situation as daughters and sons of God. In fact, the conviction grows amidst the poor that, like all human beings, they have the right to take control of the reins of their lives. This conviction is not a theoretical proposition or a rhetorical appeal, but rather a truly difficult and costly, but obligatory, lifestyle. And it is urgent, if we take into account the fact that today in Latin America and the Caribbean there are those who attempt to sow skepticism about the capacity of the poor to achieve the transformation of society by promoting what they call "the only way to think." They try to persuade the poor that in the face of the new and inescapable realities of globalization, the international economic situation, and political and military unipolarity, they have no choice but to accept the

¹³ Benedict XVI, Address at Aparecida no. 3; see also no. 26. A little further on (no. 4) he says that the Church is called to be "a lawyer for justice and a defender of the poor." See also Documento de Aparecida no. 395.

vision those realities express and to radically change the direction of their demands.

There is no true commitment to solidarity with the poor if one sees them merely as people passively waiting for help. Respecting their status as those who control their own destiny is an indispensable condition for genuine solidarity. For that reason the goal is not to become, except in cases of extreme urgency or short duration, the “voice of the voiceless” as is sometimes said—undoubtedly with the best of intentions—but rather in some way to help ensure that those without a voice find one. Being an agent of one’s own history is for all people an expression of freedom and dignity, the starting point and a source of authentic human development. The historically insignificant were—and still are in large part—the silent in history.

For this reason it is important to note that the option for the poor is not something that should be made only by those who are not poor. The poor themselves are called to make an option that gives priority to the “insignificant” and oppressed. Many do so, but it must be recognized that not all commit themselves to their sisters and brothers by race, gender, social class, or culture. The path the poor must take to identify with the least of society will be different from that of people belonging to other social strata, but it is a necessary and important step toward becoming subjects of their own destiny.

It is good to specify that the preferential option for the poor, if it aims at the promotion of justice, equally implies friendship with the poor and among the poor. Without friendship there is neither authentic solidarity nor a true sharing. In fact, it is a commitment to specific people. Aparecida says in this regard, “Only the closeness that makes us friends allows us to profoundly appreciate the values of the poor today, their legitimate desires, and their own way of living the faith. The option for the poor should lead us to friendship with the poor.”¹⁴

CONCLUSION

In this article, then, I have distinguished three dimensions of the preferential option for the poor—spiritual, theological, and evangelical—so that I might address them one by one and be able to sketch the characteristic profile of each. But it is clear that if we separate them, we distort and impoverish them. They are interwoven and nourish each other; when they are treated as watertight compartments, they lose their meaning and power.

¹⁴ Documento de Aparecida no. 398.

The preferential option for the poor constitutes a part of following Jesus that gives ultimate meaning to human existence, and that gives us as believers “reason to hope” (1 Pt 3:15). It helps us see the understanding of faith as a hermeneutics of hope, an interpretation that must be constantly enacted and reenacted throughout our lives and human history, building up reasons for hope. Finally, the option for the poor propels us to discover appropriate paths for a prophetic proclamation of the kingdom of God, a communication that respects and creates social justice, communion, fraternity, and equality among people.