

## Option for the Poor and Vulnerable

In one sense, the notion of the “preferential option for the poor” is relatively new to Catholic social teaching, as this phrase appeared in no papal social encyclical until 1987, and in no church documents at all until 1979. But in another sense, the notion of the preferential option for those who are weak and vulnerable has been present within the Christian tradition from the very start. The ministry of Jesus, in both words and deeds, was deeply wrapped up with this commitment to the well-being of the least fortunate. Without using the actual phrase “preferential option”, the Church has practiced this option in many ways, formal and informal, as it has placed concern for the most vulnerable members of society among its top priorities.

Echoes of the preferential option for the poor are strong in the stirring opening sentence of the Vatican II document *Gaudium et Spes*: The joys and the hopes, the griefs and the anxieties of the [people] of this age, especially those who are poor or in any way afflicted, these too are the joys and hopes, the griefs and anxieties of the followers of Christ (no. 1).

In identifying itself with the concerns of the poor, the Church is here interpreting its entire mission as one of service to those in need. Bringing the gospel to people in the fullest sense means caring simultaneously for their many needs, spiritual and material. The Church is most clearly itself when it is acting on the imperative to meet the urgent needs of the most vulnerable – the ones Jesus Christ so loves.

The worldwide church inherits the actual phrase “preferential option for the poor” from documents of the 1979 meeting CELAM, the abbreviation for the Spanish words translated at the Episcopal conference of Latin America. At that meeting in Puebla, Mexico, as at the previous CELAM meeting in Medellin, Columbia in 1968, the bishops of those lands so sharply divided between extremes of rich and poor boldly identified the Church with the struggles of the poor. This decisive shift was not meant to exclude anyone from the life or concerns of the Church, and certainly was not an invitation to pass judgments upon certain people because their bank accounts were too large.

Rather, the significance of this shift lies in the way it reverses a centuries-long pattern that had warped the proper understanding of the mission of the Church. As long as the Church was perceived as aligned with the wealthy landholders of Latin America, it would remain a hindrance to the full human development of the poor in that region. If the vast majority of people continued to see the Church as a tool in the hands of the upper-class bosses who were indifferent to their well being, then this perception would prevent the Church from ever becoming the “True Church” of the poor Jesus.

Clearly, the significance of this sudden about-face in the Church’s self-understanding was hard to explain outside of Latin America. To observers from other continents where social class divisions were never as sharp, it hardly made sense. The Church is always meant to be an agent of reconciliation between all people, so it may be misleading to think of the Church as “taking sides” in any way at all. The forceful restatement of the Church’s mission was only necessary in Latin American because of the need to correct a long history of clerical abuse and warped priorities.

Vatican social teaching had never gotten off on such a wrong track. From its very beginning, when nineteenth-century European Social Catholicism started to notice and address the plight of hard-pressed working families, this tradition of social concern had consistently expressed the Church’s mission to act as Jesus had acted in befriending the poor of his time. In fact, the 1991 encyclical *Centesimus Annus* contains a passage in which Pope John Paul II interprets *Rerum Novarum*’s call, a full century earlier, to improve the conditions of the workers as a manifestation of the “preferential option for the poor” long before the phrase was coined. John Paul points to the similarity between the Church’s role as advocate to the poor in 1891 and 1991 as evidence of the “church’s constant concern for and dedication to categories of people who are especially beloved to the Lord Jesus” (no. 11).

The entire tradition of Catholic social teaching can be interpreted as a unified effort on the part of church leaders to encourage a more humane society where the most vulnerable members are better protected from harm. With its limited financial resources, the Church itself can do only so much to advance the lives of the poor. However, popes and bishops, as the official voices of the Church, have exerted great efforts to speak publicly about political, economic, and social issues that have a profound impact upon the prospects of our neediest neighbors. The rationale for all the Church's efforts in this regard may be summarized precisely as the desire to make a preferential option for the poor.

If these church efforts really do bear fruit, then what would the results look like? If the message of justice and peace within the Catholic social teaching takes root in the hearts of many believers, these people would work energetically for a better world, a world characterized by not only acts of individual charity but also structures of justice and equity for all people. Discrimination and unfair barriers to progress would be eliminated. True human development would be fostered by wider access to property and socially responsible policies of business and governments throughout the world. We would measure all our institutions, from schools to corporations to social clubs, by how they treat all members of society, especially the poorest. Priorities would be altered so that more of the benefits of our richly blessed world would find their way toward those who currently possess the least. In a prosperous age like ours, no one should be excluded from a fair set of opportunities or experience the disturbing fear of permanent powerlessness.

Catholic social teaching includes a call for involvement in collaborative efforts to invite all people into the social mainstream; it is not an ethic for lazy or complacent people. To adopt the principles of Catholic social thought is to agree that we all need to work hard so that full participation is extended to all, without favoritism or discrimination. We all may benefit from the gifts that we bring to the common table of human community and solidarity.