

# Preferential option for the poor!

## *Preferencia Opción Pobres.*

The **option for the poor** or the **preferential option for the poor** is one of the basic principles of the Catholic social teaching as articulated in the 20th century.



### **Theology:**

Jesus taught that on the Day of Judgment, God will ask what each person did to help the poor and needy: "whatever you did for one of these least brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me." (Matthew 25) This is reflected in Catholic canon law, which states, "The Christian faithful are also obliged to promote social justice and, mindful of the precept of the Lord, to assist the poor." (1983 CIC, canon 222.2) According to Catholic teaching, through one's words, prayers and deeds one must show solidarity with, and compassion for, the poor. Therefore, when instituting public policy one must always keep the "preferential option for the poor" at the forefront of one's mind. Accordingly, this doctrine implies that the moral test of any society is;

"how it treats its most vulnerable members. The poor have the most urgent moral claim on the conscience of the nation. We are called to look at public policy decisions in terms of how they affect the poor."

(Option for the Poor, Major themes from Catholic Social Teaching, Archdiocese of St. Paul & Minneapolis.)

**Pope Benedict XVI** has taught that:

*"love for widows and orphans, prisoners, and the sick and needy of every kind, is as essential as the ministry of the sacraments and preaching of the Gospel". (Deus Caritas Est §22).*

This preferential option for the poor and vulnerable includes all who are marginalized in society, including unborn children, persons with disabilities, the elderly and terminally ill, and victims of injustice and oppression.

### **Context and History:**

The phrase "option for the poor" was used by Fr. Pedro Arrupe, Superior General of the Society of Jesus (Jesuits) in 1968 in a letter to the Jesuits of Latin America. The principle was articulated by the Catholic Bishops of Latin America (CELAM) at the conferences in Medellin and Puebla, as well as by particularly Pope John Paul II. Pope John Paul II's Annus (1991) elaborates on the principle (Paragraph Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church Roman Curia summarizes the principle (Compendium of the Church, Paragraphs 182-184).



influential several popes, encyclical Centesimus 57). The published by the of the Social Doctrine

The concept of a 'Preferential Option for the Poor' has not been without controversy. During the 1980's and 1990's some in the Church saw it as a threat to traditional Catholic approaches fearing that there may have been a lack of balance away from the 'sacraments' to 'justice'; this dualism is highlighted in the quotation from Pope Benedict XVI above. Pope Benedict – as Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger warned against the concept of a preferential option for the poor being hijacked by Marxist ideology with an emphasis on a class struggle rather than the innate dignity of the human person as a son or daughter of a loving God. Ratzinger's reflections identified a tension between the Church's duty to protect the dignity of people from the ravages of poverty and any direct role in the political process.



In its origins, the concept of a preferential option for the poor was connected with the liberation theology movement of the mid-20th century. As a developed theological principle, the option for the poor was first articulated by Fr. Gustavo Gutierrez, O.P. in his landmark work, A Theology of Liberation (1971). Gutierrez asserts that the principle is rooted in both the Old and New Testaments and claims that a preferential concern for the physical and spiritual welfare of the poor is an essential element of the Gospel.

The Spanish for this concept is:

#### **Preferencia Opción Pobres**

**Preferencia** does not equal preferential but "give priority to!"

**Opción** does not equal option but a binding choice, a decision and a commitment. It refers to where you put your energy.

**Pobres** refers to "all who are marginalised".

In summary, a preferential option for the poor means making the choice to give priority to the unimportant!

*Jim Nickoloff, 'Church of the Poor: the Ecclesiology of Gustavo Gutierrez, 1993.*

#### **Discussion**

***The concept of preferential option for the poor is a difficult one to live in our day to day lives and in our communities. Why do you think it is so difficult? How do you think an 'outsider' to our community would view us? Would they see that we and the Church in general, have a "preferential option for the poor?" Why? Why not? What challenge does this formation offering make for you personally and why?***

