

THE OPTION FOR THE POOR IN CHURCH TEACHING

BEGININGS

The term ‘option for the poor’ arose out of liberation theology in Latin America during the 1960s and began to appear in Church teaching documents in the 1970s.

While the Medellin Conference of CELAM (*Consejo Episcopal Latinoamericano* or Latin American Episcopal Council) made an option for the poor in 1968, this expression did not appear explicitly in CELAM documents until the Puebla Conference of 1979¹.

The concept of an option for the poor rapidly became influential among Bishops in poorer countries in Asia and Africa, and among religious orders. It was later taken up in the teachings of Bishops in richer western countries, for example, in the US Bishops’ 1986 Pastoral Letter, *Economic Justice for All*², and the Australian Catholic Bishops Conference’s 1992 Pastoral Statement, *Common Wealth for the Common Good*.

EARLY CONCERNS

During the politically turbulent 1960s, some of the things done in the name of the option for the poor, raised concerns about its possible interpretations.

Was this option about taking sides in a class struggle against the rich? Did it reduce salvation to a political or economic project? Did it cast Jesus as just a political activist? Did it exclude the rich and powerful from God’s saving love?

¹ Cleary, E., (ed), *Path From Puebla: Significant Documents of the Latin American Bishops since 1979*, Bishops’ Committee for the Church in Latin America, National Conference of Catholic Bishops, Washington, 1988, pp 11 – 13.

² Dorr, D., “Poor, Preferential Option for”, in Dwyer, J., (ed), *New Dictionary of Catholic Social Thought*, Liturgical Press, Collegeville, 1994, pp 756 – 757.

A DEVELOPING THEME

Some elements of the option for the poor were already part of Catholic Social Teaching prior to the Medellin Conference.

*Gaudium et Spes*³ (Vatican II’s Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World) had already called for a reading of the ‘signs of the times’ and affirmed that work for justice in society was part of the mission of the Church.

Populorum Progressio (On the Progress of Peoples) challenged the narrow economic concept of development current at the time⁴ and called for integral human development, and solidarity between rich and poor people and nations⁵.

Paul VI’s 1971 Apostolic Letter *Octogesima Adveniens* (A Call to Action) affirmed that: “In teaching us charity, the Gospel instructs us in the preferential respect due to the poor and the special situation they have in society: the more fortunate should renounce some of their rights so as to place their goods more generously at the service of others.”⁶

At this time, some church people had become involved in revolutionary movements, and even condoned the use of violence in the cause of liberation. Paul VI warned against ideologies that are inconsistent with Christian faith and action⁷. He acknowledged that movements inspired by ideologies may contain positive elements and urged careful discernment of whether or not Christians might legitimately get involved in them⁸.

It was this document that first introduced the qualifier ‘preferential’ to make clear that the option for the poor is not exclusive.

³ For example, *Gaudium et Spes*, n 42.

⁴ Paul VI, *Populorum Progressio*, n 14.

⁵ *Ibid.*, n 45 – 55.

⁶ Paul VI, *Octogesima Adveniens*, n 23.

⁷ For example, *Ibid.*, n 26 – 29.

⁸ *Ibid.*, n 30 – 31, 36.

In the same year, the Synod of Bishops issued *Justice in the World*, giving strong support to work for justice and liberation from oppression as part of the preaching of the Gospel⁹ and stressing the need for structural change. Chapter 1 places the Synod Fathers firmly on the side of ‘voiceless victims of injustice’ and Chapter 3 calls the Church to examine its possessions and lifestyle. While it does not adopt the language of an option for the poor, its content endorses the key elements of the option for the poor.

Paul VI’s 1975 Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Nuntiandi* presents a wholistic vision of salvation that touches both the concrete circumstances of people’s lives, and has a transcendent dimension¹⁰ – it is fulfilled in eternity. The document also clarifies the meaning of liberation:

“The church links human liberation and salvation in Jesus Christ, but she never identifies them, because she knows through revelation, historical experience and the reflection of faith that not every notion of liberation is necessarily consistent and compatible with an evangelical vision of man, of things and of events; she knows too that in order that God’s Kingdom should come it is not enough to establish liberation and to create well-being and development.”¹¹

JOHN PAUL & THE OPTION

At the opening of CELAM’s Puebla Conference, John Paul II warned against problematic ways of understanding and practicing the option for the poor, but he also strongly encouraged the Latin American Bishops to actively pursue an authentic Christian approach to the liberation of people from poverty and oppression¹².

Throughout his long pontificate John Paul II regularly used expressions such as ‘love of preference of the poor’ and a ‘preferential option for the poor’ to emphasize both the motivation of love, and the universality of God’s love. For example:

“This is an option, or a special form of primacy in the exercise of Christian charity, to which the whole tradition of the Church bears witness. It affects the life of each Christian inasmuch as he or she seeks

to imitate the life of Christ, but it applies equally to our social responsibilities and hence to our manner of living, and to the logical decisions to be made concerning the ownership and use of goods ...

“... Today, furthermore, given the worldwide dimension which the social question has assumed, this love of preference for the poor, and the decisions which it inspires in us, cannot but embrace the vast multitudes of the hungry, the needy, the homeless, those without medical care and, above all, those without hope of a better future. It is impossible not to take account of the existence of these realities. To ignore them would mean becoming like the ‘rich man’ who pretended not to know the beggar Lazarus lying at his gate (Lk 16: 19-31)”¹³

ONGOING COMMITMENT

Benedict XVI continues to affirm the Church’s commitment to an option for the poor. For example, in 2008, Benedict encouraged the Jesuits to:

“... continue and renew your mission among the poor and with the poor... As I was able to reaffirm to the Latin American Bishops gathered at the Shrine of Aparecida, “*the preferential option for the poor is implicit in the Christological faith in the God who became poor for us, so as to enrich us with his poverty (cf 2Cor 8: 9)*”. It is therefore natural that those who truly want to be a companion of Jesus really share his love for the poor. For us, the option for the poor is not ideological but is born from the Gospel. Situations of injustice and poverty are numerous and tragic, and if it is necessary to seek to understand them and fight their structural causes, it is also necessary to penetrate to the very heart of [each human being], to extirpate the deep roots of evil and sin that cut [them] off from God, without forgetting to meet people’s most urgent needs in the spirit of Christ’s charity”¹⁴

⁹ *Justice in the World*, n 1.

¹⁰ Paul VI, *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, n 27, 29.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, n 35.

¹² http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/speeches/1.../hf_jp-ii_spe_19790128_messico-puebla-episc-latam_en.html

¹³ John Paul II, *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis*, n 42.

¹⁴ Benedict XVI, *Address to the Fathers of the General Congregation of the Society of Jesus*, 21 February 2008, Rome. http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/benedict_xvi/speeches/2008/february/documents/hf_ben-xvi_spe_20080221_gesuiti_en.html Accessed on 3 April 2009.