Preferential Option for the Poor Reconsidered

Dr. Kim Lamberty
Catholic Relief Services

Abstract: This article contends that churches in the United States have in large measure interpreted the principle of *preferential option for the poor* in a way that bestows more benefits on the wealthy than on the poor. In support of that contention, the author examines the original meaning of the *option for the poor principle*, which has its roots in the reflections of theologians working in poverty-stricken contexts. She briefly surveys the work of Gustavo Gutierrez and Jon Sobrino—two theologians who have led Church thinking on poverty—and then suggests a revised praxis of preferential option for the poor for Catholics in the United States.

Keywords: option for the poor, Pope Francis, human dignity, poverty industry, liberation theology, development aid

How does God's love abide in anyone who has the world's goods and sees a brother or sister in need and yet refuses help? Little children, let us love, not in word or speech, but in truth and action.[1] —1 John 3:17

Twenty years ago, I accepted a job as the social justice minister at a large Catholic parish in suburban Washington, DC. My portfolio included managing a sister parish relationship in Haiti, a commitment my parish had agreed to a couple of years before I started. The two parishes—in the U.S. and Haiti—had already determined the parameters of the relationship, based on charitable assistance provided by the U.S. parish

[1]New Revised Standard Version.

© *Praxis: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Faith and Justice*, Volume 1, Number 1 pp. 36–46
doi: 10.5840/praxis2018114

to the Haitian parish. We supported the local Catholic school by paying the salaries of the teachers, because parents had no means to pay tuition. We provided funds for a school lunch program so that kids, some of whom walked several miles to school without eating, could get a hot meal every day. We sent an annual medical delegation so that the smaller mountain villages could at least see a doctor. We collected medicines, first aid, school supplies, shoes, and backpacks, and shipped them over. We travelled to Haiti to repair their church and chapels when a storm hit. We built them benches for the schools, a water cistern, even a high school. Our assistance was a standard response for parishes twinned in Haiti and around the world, and was encouraged by the Haitian Church and the U.S. organization that facilitated our work.

Frequently I would arrive at my church office in the morning to find a pile of stuff left there by a parishioner wanting to send something to Haiti. Often it was old medical supplies or expired medicine sent over when someone cleaned out their closet. I will never forget the woman who donated her collection of 1200 Beanie Babies, tags still attached, neatly packaged in plastic bins.

I left my position after seven years, wondering if we had really accomplished anything in Haiti. In a conversation with the Haitian pastor, who was also moving on, he told me that he would like to see a study of aid sent to Haiti over the past fifty years, which he thought would provide data to prove what he already intuitively knew: our work made things better for some people in the moment, but it did not change the situation of desperate poverty for the community or most of its residents. If anything, it made things worse, because the community was now completely dependent on the good will of my parish to have many of its basic needs met. When I left my position, they were afraid it would all end, and it could have.

The U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops describes the obligation to respond to the needs of the poor and vulnerable as a core tenant of our Catholic faith.

> A basic moral test is how our most vulnerable members are faring. In a society marred by deepening divisions between rich and poor, our tradition recalls the story of the Last Judgment and instructs us to put the needs of the poor and vulnerable first.[2]

The challenge for Catholics is not that we are called to respond to suffering—we know that we are—but how to do it constructively and effectively, addressing the root causes of suffering and without doing more harm than good.

---

[2]http://www.usccb.org/beliefs-and-teachings/what-we-believe/catholic-social-teaching/option-for-the-poor-and-vulnerable.cfm.

In my view, the churches in the United States have in large measure interpreted the principle of "preferential option for the poor" in a way that bestows more benefits on the wealthy than on the poor. To understand that contention, it will help to have another look at the original meaning of the "option for the poor" principle, which has its roots in the reflections of theologians working in poverty-stricken contexts. This essay will examine anew the work of Gustavo Gutierrez and Jon Sobrino—two theologians who have led Church thinking on poverty—and suggest a revised praxis of preferential option for the poor for Catholics in the United States.

Preferential Option for the Poor

> *Hence the poverty of the poor is not a call to generous relief action, but a demand that we go and build a different social order.* —Gustavo Gutierrez[3]

There is no need here for an exhaustive description of global poverty. The reader likely already knows that there are nearly a billion people living on less than a dollar a day, which means they live in a permanent state of insecurity, highly vulnerable to the shocks and storms that are a regular part of the human condition. Both Sobrino and Gutierrez call these the crucified peoples (*pueblos crucificados*), the great sign of our times demanding a response. For Christians, the preferential option for the poor is implicit in our understanding of God, who became poor, and was crucified, for us. But good theology is not enough, writes Gutierrez. What is needed is action: a commitment to use resources and intellect to build a more just world.[4]

Sobrino elaborates on the nature of the action we need, calling for a four-part framework.[5] The first he calls *dialectic*, or confrontation. The non-poor must enter the world of the poor and honestly confront the reality of that world. The existence of poverty means that there is an oppressor—a cause—and that cause must be both understood and confronted. This confrontation means that the non-poor and the poor alike *reject* poverty as contrary to the vision of the Kingdom of God. If we reject poverty, then charitable aid solutions that focus strictly on resource sharing and sending gifts will never suffice. It indicates a willingness to share the wealth, and is a sign of generosity, but does not contribute to providing an opportunity for the poor to create their own wealth. It leaves the poor of the world dependent on the generosity of

[3]Quoted in Farmer, "Health, Healing and Social Justice," 35.

[4]Gutierrez, "Saying and Showing to the Poor: 'God Loves You,'" 34.

[5]Description of the four elements taken from Sobrino, *No Salvation Outside the Poor*, 31–33.

the rich. And if the poor are not given an opportunity to create wealth, such acts of charity simply perpetuate the status quo.

The second element is *partiality*: the poor must be placed at the center. If we don't think this way, Sobrino writes, there will be no solution. In 2007, I spent a few months living in a rural indigenous community in Guatemala that primarily survived on small-scale, subsistence agriculture. This particular community was faced with a multinational mining company, which, through a variety of legal and extra-legal measures, was displacing farmers and destroying the landscape in return for providing short-term low-paying unskilled jobs. The mining company placed its stockholders at the center, and the goal was profit. The poor may have received some short-term benefit through job creation, but long-term their way of life was ruined and their situation of poverty remained unchanged. One can find similar stories of the behavior of companies across the globe, including in the United States. Large companies pay low salaries in poor countries, but the wealth goes to owners and executives who often live in the more developed countries. Ultimately, maintaining the status quo of poverty and need benefits the wealthy, who, because of the extreme vulnerability of the poor, can create low-paying jobs and increase their own profit. The non-poor respond with charitable assistance that diminishes suffering but does not eliminate it.

The third element is *engagement.* The Church should make the world of the poor its own. This implies authentic relationship between the poor and the non-poor. It also means that the Church, as well as individuals, makes decisions over time—about use of funds, about priorities, about taking a stand for the cause of social justice—that reflect the fact that our world is also the poor's world. Engagement means that those decisions are determined in dialogue with the people whom we have placed at the center.

The fourth element is *humility*: "Humanity is divided between those who cannot take life for granted, the poor, and those who do take it for granted, the non-poor."[6] In this context, Sobrino writes, "the option for the poor must be permeated with humility so that in the end it will not become an option for oneself disguised as an option for the other."[7] As noted above, taking an option for oneself disguised an as option for the poor is, in my experience, a common response by the non-poor to poverty, although certainly most people are not aware of it.

[6]Ibid. 32.
[7]Ibid. 33.

The Option for Oneself

A particularly sore subject seems to be the widespread negative attitude among advocates of the option for the poor toward creating wealth. . . . In contrast, distributing and sharing wealth enjoys a much better reputation.
—Georges Enderle[8]

A basic moral test, the USCCB writes, is how our most vulnerable members are faring. Children are among our most vulnerable members, so perhaps the best illustration of where we have gone wrong is how the non-poor treat poverty-stricken children. An example of this is the proliferation of orphanages.

Worldwide, there are at minimum 8 million children living in orphanages. Many estimates are much higher. Eighty to ninety percent of these institutionalized children have living parents. Orphanages are clustered in contexts of extreme poverty, where parents give up their children in the hopes they will be better off, and where the social systems that might support parents who have children with disabilities or other challenges are weak or nonexistent. These institutions frequently receive assistance from Christian groups, who provide material support and send mission trips or volunteers. These groups regularly promote their "orphan" ministries, and attract supporters and volunteers who like the idea of helping needy children overseas.

The problem is that these kids have parents. Decades of research has shown that children are better off with their parents, no matter how poor, and when removed to institutions suffer from intellectual, emotional, and physical problems throughout their lives.[9] Institutionalizing children is not the solution to poverty. If the parents are truly unfit, then the child can be placed with other relatives, or foster care or adoption, or a small family-style group home environment. The solution includes income (or wealth) generation for poor families, and social structures that support a system of family-based care when abuse or addiction is involved. Social structures require a tax base, and a tax base requires wealth generation.

Sick people are also among society's most vulnerable, and poor people who are sick even more so. During a recent trip to Haiti, I had the opportunity to visit two hospitals. The first is operated by a faith-based foundation from the United States. They operate the hospital nearly free of charge in a country where the majority live far under the poverty level of $2 per day. Although many of the personnel are Haitian, and the hospital provides some training for Haitian

[8]Enderle, "The Option for the Poor and Business Ethics," 42.

[9]https://www.changingthewaywecare.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/11/CRS_FINDING-FAMILIES_SUMMARY_111617.pdf.

medical students, it also brings in doctors and other staff from the U.S. This is a great short-term experience for U.S. medical professionals, most of whom will move on after a year or two. On the U.S. side, the foundation maintains a staff whose job it is to raise funds to support the hospital. The hospital is known for the high quality medical care and surgery it provides, and draws patients from around Haiti. When I was there, the grounds were packed with people waiting in line to be seen, and some were camping on the sidewalk.

The second hospital is operated by the Catholic Archdiocese of Port-au-Prince. Without a long-term U.S. funding source, this hospital depends on payments from patients to survive. With the help of Catholic Relief Services the hospital administrators designed a strategy to attract more well-off patients who could then subsidize patients who are unable to pay or can pay much less. However, as long as there is a high-quality hospital with free or nearly free medical care available, even those who can pay will choose to go there. In the marketplace, it is hard to compete with free. It is a beautiful hospital facility in the heart of Port-au-Prince, rebuilt from the ground up after the earthquake, but the rooms were nearly empty when I visited.

The U.S.-funded hospital seems like a perfect solution for Haiti's poor and sick. However, that hospital is permanently dependent on the generosity of U.S. donors. Is it possible that their foundation will exist in perpetuity funding a hospital in Haiti, or is it possible that one day it might fold up or move elsewhere? In addition, because it is dependent on outside donors, it does not really belong to Haiti or Haitians. It is a U.S. hospital which attracts the best medical personal in Haiti because it has outside funding. This model, while providing a short-term fix for the medical needs of Haiti's population, does not strengthen or expand the ability of Haiti to take care of the medical needs of its own population over the long term.

The Catholic hospital is owned and operated by the Haitian Catholic Church, which belongs to Haiti. A strong hospital run by a permanent Haitian institution; however, the hospital cannot support itself without a funding base. They can and will apply for overseas funding, but ultimately, they need a situation where patients can pay, which means income (wealth) generation for Haiti's population. And a foreign-supported free hospital which draws patients who can pay away from a Haitian institution that needs their business weakens the Haitian hospital system. Even the state hospital is dealing with the same problem: without a tax base they also cannot operate without payments from patients. A tax base requires wealth generation.

So why does this "share the wealth" model continue to survive and even thrive? Because it is great for the non-poor. We choose how much and to whom to give, feeling good about our own generosity. We generate jobs for ourselves

to sustain the charity industry. We create dependence on our generosity, fueling our suspicions that the poor really can't manage their own affairs without us. And we retain the bulk of the world's wealth for ourselves.

SOLUTIONS

> *This means education, access to health care, and above all employment, for it is through free, creative, participatory and mutually supportive labor that human beings express and enhance the dignity of their lives. A just wage enables them to have adequate access to all the other goods which are destined for our common use.* —Pope Francis[10]

An interpretation of the "preferential option for the poor" that does not aim to address the systems and structures that cause poverty, and finally to eliminate it, is not a true option for the poor. As Sobrino noted, this requires first and foremost a deep analysis of the situation to understand the complex factors at play. It is much easier to establish an institution to care for poor children than it is to figure out how their families can overcome poverty. It is easier to build a hospital and staff it yourself than it is to work to strengthen local systems and structures so that they can establish their own hospital. It is easier to send money to pay teachers than it is to work with a school to design a plan for long term financial sustainability, or to work with a community to increase household and community income so that parents can cover the costs themselves.

There are no easy solutions. I offer here a few principles, based on the work and experience of Catholic Relief Services (CRS) and my own experience, to assist in thinking differently about the practice of the option for the poor.

Accompaniment. Pope Francis has stated that the Church must initiate everyone—priests, religious, and laity—into the art of accompaniment, "which teaches us to remove our sandals before the sacred ground of the other."[11] Accompaniment is an attitude and a spirituality that uplifts the dignity of the other and places their well-being first. This attitude and spirituality are only possible through prayer and deep faith in God, because only through faith can I trust enough to let go of my own self-importance. Grounded in friendship, a spirituality of accompaniment calls us to journey with communities in pain, shoulder some of the burden and, through collaboration, mutuality, and partnership, seek long-term sustainable solutions.

---

[10]Pope Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium*, 192.
[11]Ibid., 169.

> Accompaniment means that those who are wealthy recognize that the wealth they have does not belong only to them; it also belongs to the farmer, factory worker, or miner who produces the object that generates wealth. . . . Accompaniment also means that those who are wealthy develop true friendships with those who are poor, entering into their world, accepting some of their risk, developing equal relationships, and programs which lead to improved livelihoods for those who are poor. In this way, those who are poor are included in civil society, becoming protagonists in their own life stories, artisans of their own destinies. This is the option for the poor.[12]

Partnership. People and organizations in their own context are best suited to identify and address their own development needs. Partnership involves identifying local leaders and institutions that can be changemakers, and working together with them to strengthen their capacity to achieve their own goals. Healthy local institutions are best able to provide consistent and long-term solutions.[13] CRS offers an online training program in partnership and capacity strengthening which provides tools and insights for the development practitioner.[14]

Training. Nearly a billion people live on less than one dollar a day, and 70 percent of them are small-scale farmers. Small-scale farmers produce 80 percent of the world's food supply; the world is dependent on them, and yet as a group they suffer the most from extreme poverty. CRS, together with other organizations, studied this population to see how to effectively connect it to markets and increase its income. The outcome of the study was a training program on the five skill sets needed, which includes financial and marketing training, natural resource management, and organizational skills. The research and training materials can be found online.[15] In general, no matter what sector—education, health care, water and sanitation, agriculture—training programs will strengthen the capacity of local actors to manage their own institutions.

Access to Capital. All small business owners and farmers know that access to financing enables them to expand their businesses and to weather the down times. However, small-scale farmers and entrepreneurs in poverty-stricken environments find it extremely difficult to access capital: banks find

---

[12]Lamberty, "The Art of Accompaniment," 337.

[13]https://www.crs.org/our-work-overseas/program-areas/partnership.

[14]http://www.ics.crs.org/?_ga=2.66671977.657602373.1516029081-888443990.1508520394.

[15]https://www.crs.org/our-work-overseas/program-areas/agriculture/smart-skills-smallholder-farmers.

the investment too risky. Microfinance institutions are a helpful addition, but generally their loans are large for families living on one or two dollars a day, and come with a hefty interest rate. Very small-scale farmers or businesses cannot afford the interest and do not need such large loans, at least to take the first steps out of poverty.

CRS emphasizes savings-led lending which addresses the need of the poorest of the poor to access loans for capital to increase their income. The CRS methodology, called Savings and Internal Lending Communities, or SILC, has its roots in community-based credit associations. CRS provides training to local leaders, who in turn provide training in financial management to small groups who form to save and to lend to each other. Each member contributes a small amount each month, and members can apply for loans from this fund. The members determine the interest rate, and after a specified time, the profits are divided among the members.

> By facilitating savings services, CRS enables the poor to build up useful lump sums without incurring excessive debt or interest charges. Moreover, the SILC process helps protect members' limited resources by shifting their money from poorly protected informal locations (e.g., under the mattress) to investments in group members' businesses.[16]

This process helps build financial resilience and diminish vulnerability to shocks by encouraging saving, and increases household income by making investment capital available.

Ethical Purchasing. Small-scale farmers make up a large portion of the extreme poor; part of the solution for them is access to markets that pay a just price for their products. Small-scale farmers overseas produce many of the products consumed in the United States, such as coffee, tea, cotton, and fruits. If they are poor, it is because they do not receive a price for their product high enough to support themselves and their families. US consumers, instead of purchasing stuffed animals as giveaways to poor children, can pay a little more for fair trade products, or purchase goods from companies that adhere to strict standards of social responsibility and ensure their producers and are paid fairly.[17]

Advocacy. Some causes of poverty do not have their origins at the community level. Policies and practices of governments and corporations can also contribute to global suffering. Advocacy is taking action to support a cause, and includes educating and mobilizing citizens to develop and promote poli-

[16]https://www.crs.org/our-work-overseas/program-areas/savings-led-microfinance.

cies.[17] In the countries where we work, CRS will often work to develop and strengthen the capacity of local civil society to advocate on their own behalf.

In addition, the policies of the government and corporations in the United States impact poverty worldwide. Citizens and stockholders can advocate for "corporate responsibility" so that companies pay a living wage, provide a safe work environment, and do not destroy the environment, not only in the U.S, but in factories, farms, and mines overseas. Government policies determine how much aid we provide to contexts of extreme poverty, for emergencies as well as long term development aid, and what that aid is used for. Policies on immigration, human trafficking, climate change, and violent conflict affect poverty overseas and are considered in the halls of the Congress of the United States. As citizens of the United States we can take action that makes a difference in the lives of the most vulnerable around the world.

Conclusion

Pope Francis writes, quoting Paul VI, that "the more fortunate should renounce some of their rights so as to place their goods more generously at the service of others."[18] Perhaps it is true, in a market system, that the non-poor have a "right" to as much wealth as they can accumulate. However, this accumulation can be done only at the expense of the poor, because if those at the top earn more of the company returns, then those at the bottom earn less of them. And if those at the top demand to pay a lower price for a good or service, then the provider of that good or service receives less. A charitable response from those at the top is not enough, because it leaves the poor in a condition of poverty. The only solution is love, placing the needs of the other before myself, and the needs of the most vulnerable first. This means an effort to design programs and policies that create wealth for the poor, even at the expense of the wealth of the non-poor. This is a true preferential option for the poor.

References

Catholic Relief Services Webpages

https://www.crs.org/get-involved/advocate.
https://www.crs.org/our-work-overseas/program-areas/savings-led-microfinance.
https://www.crs.org/our-work-overseas/program-areas/partnership.

[17] https://www.crs.org/get-involved/advocate.
[18] *Evangelii Gaudium*, 190.

http://www.ics.crs.org/?_ga=2.66671977.657602373.1516029081-888443990.1508520394.
https://www.crs.org/our-work-overseas/program-areas/agriculture/smart-skills-smallholder-farmers.
https://www.changingthewaywecare.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/11/CRS_FINDING-FAMILIES_SUMMARY_111617.pdf.

United States Conference of Catholic Bishops Webpage

http://www.usccb.org/beliefs-and-teachings/what-we-believe/catholic-social-teaching/option-for-the-poor-and-vulnerable.cfm.

Other Sources

Enderle, Georges. "The Option for the Poor and Business Ethics." In *The Preferential Option for the Poor Beyond Theology*, edited by Groody, Daniel G. and Gutierrez, Gustavo, 28–46. South Bend: University of Notre Dame Press, 2014.
Farmer, Paul. "Health, Healing and Social Justice: Insights from Liberation Theology." In *In the Company of the Poor*, edited by Michael Griffin and Jennie Weiss Block, 35–70. Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2013.
Pope Francis. *Evangelii Gaudium*. Vatican City, 2013.
Gutierrez, Gustavo. "Saying and Showing to the Poor: 'God Loves You.'" In *In the Company of the Poor*, edited by Michael Griffin and Jennie Weiss Block, p. 27–34. Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2013.
Lamberty, Kim. "The Art of Accompaniment." *Missiology: An International Review* 43, no. 3 (2015): 324–338.
Sobrino, Jon. *No Salvation Outside the Poor*. Mayknoll: Orbis Books, 2008.

Dr. Kim Lamberty is the Director of University and Mission Engagement for Catholic Relief Services, where she leads efforts to educate students, faculty, and administration about the work and mission of CRS, and engage them in action to support it. An expert in US Church-based mission and development programs, with a particular focus on Haiti, she began working with CRS after the 2010 Haiti earthquake. She frequently leads workshops and publishes on best practices in global short-term immersion trips for education and mission, on parish twinning, and on church-based development projects. Kim is also co-founder and president of Just Haiti, Inc., a fair trade coffee development program that works in partnership with associations of subsistence coffee growers in Haiti and markets their coffee in the United States. Kim holds a Master's in International Affairs from Columbia University in New York, an MA in theology from Washington Theological Union, and a Doctor of Ministry, in cross-cultural mission, from Catholic Theological Union in Chicago.