

The Catholic Intellectual Tradition

The Preferential Option for the Poor

In a world of proliferating weapons of mass destruction and terrorism, the specter of a few rich living alongside a huge and growing number of desperately poor people is both morally unacceptable and extremely dangerous.

The population of the less developed world outnumbers the population of the developed world by more than 4 to 1, and the disproportion is growing alarmingly. Almost 99 percent of the world's population growth now occurs in the less developed world. By 2050, the population of poor countries will outnumber that of the developed world by a factor of more than 6 to 1.

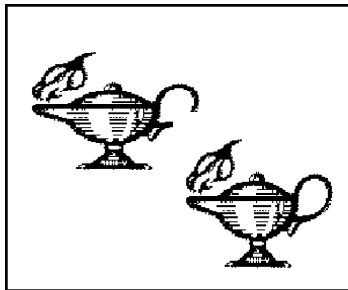
The solution offered by the U.S. Catholic Bishops in their pastoral letter on the economy is a "preferential option for the poor," which, according to Pope John Paul II, this means "having a special openness with those that suffer, are humiliated, and left on the margin of society."

The first foundation of the preferential option for the poor is biblical. In the book of Genesis, God creates man and woman who are made in God's image. "As such every human being possesses an inalienable dignity."

In the Book of Exodus, the Israelites were enslaved and oppressed aliens who cried out to God for deliverance. God heard their cries and came to deliver them. The Israelites are to respond by treating the

poor in their midst as God treated them.

Jesus announced the nearness of the reign of God. He taught us to pray that God's kingdom may come to earth as it is in heaven. This summons us to seek ways to co-create community. The justice of the community is measured by its treatment of the poor, the widowed



and the orphaned – namely, those on the margins of society.

Jesus taught that "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." He illustrates this love with the parable of the Samaritan who, moved with compassion, interrupts his journey to come to the aid of a dying man. Jesus also offered a vivid picture of the last judgment. The blessed are those who fed the hungry, gave drink to the thirsty, welcomed the stranger, clothed the naked, and visited the sick and imprisoned.

The second origin of the preferential option for the poor is the tradition of the Catholic Church. The early community at Jerusalem distributed its possessions so that "there was no needy

person among them." Throughout history, Christian communities have developed structures to support the poor.

A century ago, Pope Leo XIII issued the famous call to change radically the structure of modern capitalism to meet the needs of all in the community. For this to happen, the bishops have called for a change of heart.

The preferential option for the poor moves the bishops to focus their attention on U.S. relations with the Third World. A country as rich as ours has a moral obligation to lead in eliminating "the scandal of the shocking inequality between the rich and the poor."

Implementing the preferential option for the poor is parallel to the political challenge that confronted the founders of our nation. The founders were compelled to develop ways of thinking and political institutions that had never existed before. The time has come for a similar experiment in securing economic rights for every person.

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Contributions (525-word length) can be sent to CPO 23).

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