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The Preferential Option for the Poor - Liberation Theology, a Call to Action

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The Preferential Option for the Poor Liberation Theology - A Call to Action

**Paper presented at the 2010 Poverty in the Medieval and Early Modern World Conference the
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The Preferential Option for the Poor is the Fourth principle of Catholic social teaching, calling everyone to emulate Christ by loving, serving, giving, and tending with special concern the poor and the weak¹. St Augustine (354-430 CE) understands the option for the poor as a moral obligation for those who want to spread not only justice but love². Emphasizing it at the end of almost all his sermons.

- give to the poor (Serm. 61,13),
- think of the poor (Serm. 25,8; Serm. 122,6),
- give to the poor what you have gathered (Serm. 66,5).
- Christ ... here, among us, still suffers hunger, thirst and nakedness: here he is poor and in the poor. (Serm. 123,4)³

St Gregory the Great (540-605 CE) reinforces this moral obligation stating:

When we attend to the needs of those in want, we give them what is theirs, not ours. More than performing works of mercy, we are paying a debt of justice⁴.

The option for the poor is a Judeo-Christian concept rooted in both the Old and New Testaments. Within the context of Liberation Theology, it was first used by Fr Pedro Arrupe in 1968, and developed as a theological principle by Gustavo Gutierrez⁵

¹ **Catechism of the Catholic Church (CCC)** (1994), Official edition for Australia and New Zealand, Homebush NSW: St Pauls – Society of St Paul, pp 587-590

² www.midwestaugustinians.org/justpaxprefopt_aug.html - United States; accessed 11/05/2010

³ Idem

⁴ **Catechism of the Catholic Church (CCC)** (1994), Official edition for Australia and New Zealand, Homebush NSW: St Pauls – Society of St Paul, p.588, Art: 2446

⁵ <http://en.ignatianwiki.org/Preferential Option for the poor and vulnerable>

Christ lived 2000 years ago, St Augustine walked this earth 300 years later, by the Middle Ages, the Early Modern Times, or even in our Postmodern Era the poor and oppressed are still counted by the millions. Poverty seems to be pervasive and with it the shame, the rejection, the hunger, the fear, the anger, the resentment, the resignation of the poor. Shall we therefore ask how much success has been achieved in giving dignity, consideration and love to the poor? Is poverty a political issue? Is it social? Or is it actually a personal commitment which each of us has failed to compromise with?

For the last four years I have worked as a sessional tutor at the University of Notre Dame. I would like to share with you the conclusion to an essay written by a young man who at the beginning of the semester was upset for having to do Theology as a core unit, being as he personally declared anti-religious. Some weeks ago, Barry's conclusion to the essay question "Who is Jesus" was:

Whether you believe in God or not it is hard not to believe in Jesus as a person. All the facts are written on the wall that such a man existed. To me it is irrelevant whether or not he was the Son of God because it does not matter. His teachings on equality and methods of living life are so superior that it is understandable why people would regard him as the Son of God. Jesus can be anything whether it be a person you base your morals on, the way you want to live your life, a person who lived in history or just a fictional character. To me Jesus is a person who lived his life in an exceptional manner one that we can all aspire to⁶.

As a tutor I have frequently seen in our youth, whether religious or not, the desire to find a model to follow in their pursuit for good. So I invite you to explore with me the possibility of finding a model of good in the preferential option for the poor as posed by St Augustine, lived by St Francis of Assisi and set as goal by Liberation Theology today.

⁶ Dry, B., (2010) Who is Jesus? An essay presented in partial fulfilment for Sem 1 2010 TH101 Introduction to Theology unit at Notre Dame University, Fremantle, p. 5

Jesus' command, to "love one another" (Jn 13:34-35), "even your enemies" (Lk 6:27), is a moral imperative which St Augustine roots on humility, faith, truth and love⁷. Love as the core of social action facilitates doing good for others. Augustine attributes to all persons, whether baptized or not, a natural inclination for morality stemming from the ontological link with the Creator, and therefore, the capacity to experience within a longing for good and an awareness of what is right and wrong⁸. For St Augustine, on the other hand, moral evil is the will turning away from the total good for which it was created, thus falling into a privation of love⁹. Considering the love of God as the core of morality, Augustine proposes that human beings require to share in that love by serving others, specially the disadvantaged¹⁰. Love and service are therefore the foundations of the preferential option for the poor.

Let us ponder, what is the difference between the suffering of a human being 700 years ago and a homeless adolescent, an abused child, or a dementia elderly on Perth streets? The history of suffering, poverty and oppression extends along time in a continuum which makes no difference in terms of gender, age, geography or era. In Jesus words: *You will always have the poor among you, but you will not always have me* (Jn 12:8). This saying perfectly describing the prevalence of poverty in the world while Jesus' example vanishes between vanity and opulence.

⁷ Clark, Mary, T., RSCJ, (1994) *Augustine*, London: Continuum, 2000, pp 42-57

⁸ Clark, pp 42-57

⁹ Ibid, p. 54

¹⁰ www.midwestaugustinians.org/justpaxprefopt_aug.html - United States

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The preferential option for the poor, in line with Liberation Theology, urges us both to care and serve the marginalized among us and to find Christ within. If history and geography have demonstrated that kings, politicians and their systems have failed to remove poverty and oppression from the world, is it not time then to try individual change? And, with the solidarity that distinguishes Liberation Theology not only opt for the poor but be one with them.

I am not going to talk here about the conditions of the poor in the Middle Ages because you certainly know about it more than I do, instead I would like you to encounter a late 12th century example of poverty as the preferential option of love. Just like our young university student and confessed atheist Barry found in Jesus the best social role model to follow so did another young man 800 hundred years ago.

St Francis of Assisi

St Francis of Assisi emerges from the Middle Ages not only as the perfect moral model for human liberation but, as Leonardo Boff OFM has expressed, the ideal model for Liberation Theology as a movement¹¹.

James Cowan¹² states that Francis built his own reality out of a life lived in poverty. And, faithful to the principle of poverty as a spiritual discipline, Francis turned the act of dispossession into a virtue. Away from the “tyranny of things” and ownership he found freedom of the spirit. A freedom scarce in this age of affluence, secularity and consumerism where we find it almost impossible to release ourselves from the demands made by a life

¹¹ Corbett, B., (2005) Comments on Leonardo Boff’s book “Saint Francis: A Model for Human Liberation, New York: Crossroad, 1982. Translated from the Spanish by John W. Diercksmeier. Bob Cobett corbette@webster.edu

¹² James Cowan, Francis, a Saint’s Way, Sydney: Hodder & Stoughton, 2001, p vi

conditioned by material things and “scientific truths”. Paradoxically, Francis found that the hidden face of truth can only reveal itself to those who live in openness, with no other security than trust. Releasing himself from the prison of worldly possessions, his life became one of unconditional acceptance. With a heart and a mind attuned by endurance, suffering, humbleness, and poverty which fuelled his ongoing joy, compassion and love for all living creatures¹³.

Francis, a courageous man, left the world behind to embody Christ as an existential reality¹⁴ and made of poverty the preferential option of Love. More intimately, in a mystical encounter dictated to Hans von Balthasar while she was in trance, Adrienne von Speyr, describes Francis as follows:

He is of such humility that he learns something from each of his brothers, from every person that comes to him.

His charity and his obedience are from first to last the fruit of his poverty. ... It was poverty that conveyed everything to him. It is as if Christ’s poverty was the first thing he saw; this is what taught him how to give praise, to pray, to contemplate, and to live. Even his humility appears a consequence of his poverty: when a person is so poor, then he has nothing but to be humble.

He manages to love everyone just as if each individual were Christ himself. He suffers, because in his simplicity, he does not comprehend how a person can think of the commandment to love one’s neighbour as anything but the most urgent thing there is¹⁵.

So here we have Francis, as perceived by Dr von Speyr, adopting poverty as the preferential

¹³ Ibid

¹⁴ Ibid

¹⁵ Von Speyr, A., *Book of All Saints*, Translated from the original German edition: *Das Allerheiligenbuch: Erster Teil*, 1966, by Johannes Verlag, Einsiedeln, San Francisco, Ignatius Press, 2008, pp 67-8.

option of love to follow Christ's steps and serve others.

Bob Corbett, renown atheist and existentialist, considers St Francis as an admirable human being worthy of reflection and imitation¹⁶, for his perseverant love and humility, his innocence, his deterrence of violence and 'class warfare', and, especially relevant in these days, his love for nature¹⁷.

St Francis' denial of self made of him in Medieval Times the closest imitation of Christ, and in the way he embraced, served, and united with the poor a perfect model for human liberation today.

Rollo Mayo describes Francis' innocence as full of freshness, purity and newness¹⁸. Unfortunately, innocence and freshness lost in our days, thinning away within a culture of death, where egoistic prerogatives breed oppression and poverty as a consequence of sin.

Liberation Theology

Let us remember that every healing that Jesus performed was a personal encounter with the sinner, that forgiveness of sin was prior or simultaneous to the healing; and that it was preceded by the person's faith in Jesus and usually followed by His command: "go and sin no more" (Jn 8:12). Jesus did not only cure the person but gave each individual a new sense of self. By trying to blame human misery on social and political entities, declaring like

¹⁶ Corbett, p 6

¹⁷ Idem, p. 3 & 6

¹⁸ Idem, p. 3

Pattison that : “sin, sorrow and well-being do not start or end with individual people”¹⁹, we diminish both individual suffering and individual responsibility. To search for justice by fighting and trying to change “abstract entities”, vanishes one of the most beautiful gifts Liberation Theology has brought to the poor: Christ as a role model to endure suffering and to combat sin.

Oppression as sin

And what is sin? From a secular collegiate dictionary the definition of sin is:

1 a : an offense against religious or moral law

b : an action that is or is felt to be highly reprehensible <it's a *sin* to waste food>

2 a : transgression of the law of God

b : a vitiated state of human nature in which the self is estranged from God

3 a : Evil of human action²⁰.

Now let us approach the Christian understanding of sin, first from Gustavo Gutierrez', father of Liberation Theology point of view²¹:

In the liberation approach sin is not considered as an individual private or merely interior reality –asserted just enough to necessitate a “spiritual redemption which does not challenge the order in which we live. Sin is regarded as a social, historical fact, the absence of brotherhood and love in

¹⁹ **Pattison, S.**, (1997), Pastoral Care and Liberation Theology, London: SPCK, p. 79

²⁰ **Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary**, 11th Ed., Springfield MA: Merriam-Webster 2003

²¹ **Erickson, M. J.**, (2000), The Word Became Flesh, A Contemporary Incarnational Christology, Michigan: Baker Books

relationships among persons, the breach of friendship with God and with other men/women, and therefore, an interior, personal fracture. [...]

Gutierrez characterizes sin as a selfish turning into oneself which breaches one's relationships with God and one's neighbour. Being so, behind each unjust social structure we find not only a collective will but individual sin.

Secondly, let us say that although Liberation Theologians use the concept of social sin to describe the sinful oppressive nature of the society in which people live and are affected by. John Paul II, rejects the belief that practically every sin is a social sin, being that blame and/or responsibility cannot be placed on some vague entity or anonymous collectivity :

(1) Any sin is social in the sense that such offence, no matter how private, adversely affects human solidarity.

(2) A sin is social when it is directly an offence against another human being²².

And, thirdly, the Catechism of the Catholic Church²³ states:

1) ... there are "sins that cry to heaven": the cry of the people oppressed (Ex 3:7-10), the cry of the foreigner, the widow, and the orphan (Ex 20:20-22), the injustice to the wage earner (Deut 24:14-15, Jas 5:4) . This kind of sins makes persons accomplices of one another ... causing greed, violence and injustice. *Therefore creating* "Structures of sin" *which* are the expression and effect of *multiplied* personal sin²⁴.

²² Walsh, M., (1994), John Paul II, a biography, London: HarperCollins Publishers

²³ **Catechism of the Catholic Church (CCC)** (1994), Official edition for Australia and New Zealand, Homebush NSW: St Pauls – Society of St Paul, p.457, Arts: 1867, 1868, 1869

²⁴ CCC (1994), p.457, Arts: 1869

2) Sin is a personal act. We have a responsibility for the sins committed by others when we cooperate by participating directly and voluntarily in them or by ordering, advising, praising, or approving them²⁵

3) Sin is a direct act against God, as crime is against the state and immorality against society. Yet as the most profound of these disorders, sin is present in the other two as well²⁶

As we can see, personal sin permeates and extends from the individual microlevel into the meso and macro levels of society to become social and structural sin. In other words, if sin has its origins in the individual, it follows that the sum of individual sins –mine, yours, theirs, ours, account for social and structural sin. Thus, we are all responsible in one degree or another for the existence and preservation of oppression in the world.

O p p r e s s i o n

Two worlds apart?

In the Third World oppression is sin, translated and palpable in poverty, in illness, in unemployment, in hunger, in lack of housing, in torture, in military occupation, and in the death of innocent victims.

²⁵ CCC (1994), p.457, Arts: 1868

²⁶ McClendon, J.W.M., Jr., Sin, in the New Handbook of Christian Theology, Musser, D.W., and Price, J. L., Eds., Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1992

In the First World oppression is perceived as not happening at home, but this is only an illusion created by our materialistic minds, where “shopping” and eating have become compulsive; where life is lived on the fast lane, and hopelessness is excused as “a chemical imbalance in the brain”, where we have allowed drugs to be “recreational” and amphetamines to be stuffed into ADHD children day after day, where alcoholism is equated to national identity, and abortion and suicide are solutions to life problems. Where we are so immersed in self and social deception that we think: Nah ... oppression does not happen in the First World. We are all free here, or are we?

A call to Action

To pursue human liberation in the world, the change has to start within each of us, to change social structures we must first improve the fractured bricks from which they are built, and search, as Francis did, for individual liberation through internal change. For, how can we liberate others if we are enslaved by our own egos?

How can we opt for being one with the poor? When we find so humiliating to be poor. How can we follow the best social model, when we feel ashamed to defend Christian values, to stand for Christianity “because it’s politically incorrect”. We deserve to be oppressed and we are. In our coward silence, in our grey existence we pull every day the wheels of oppression over our own backs, worshipping idols while convincing ourselves that we live in the free world. Oscar Romero poses the alternative: “Either we believe in a God of life, or we serve the idols of death”²⁷.

²⁷ **Romero, O.**, (1980) Last Homily , in *Liberation Theology: A Documentary History*, Alfred T. Hennelly, S. J., Ed., (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1990 304-6), in S107 Thinking Theology, Unit Reader 2002, Murdoch University, Perth: Murdoch 2002, 156-163

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If we want to have responsive and responsible institutions and structures, each of us must first be responsive to Love and responsible for our own actions. Or how can we build strong and healthy societies if we are fractured bricks? We need to understand the “interdependence between personal betterment and the improvement of society”²⁸. And challenge ourselves to change the thought: “How can I make my neighbour better?” for, “How can I be a better neighbour?” Then ... we might be standing at the doors of liberation.

²⁸ CCC pp563 par 2344

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