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# A PREFERENTIAL OPTION FOR THE POOR

Contributed by Jim Jordal  
Wednesday, 15 January 2014

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By Jim Jordal

My brothers, don't hold the faith of our Lord Jesus Christ of glory with partiality. For if a man with a gold ring, in fine clothing, comes into your synagogue and a poor man in filthy clothing also comes in; and you pay special attention to him who wears the fine clothing, and say, "Sit here in a good place;" and you tell the poor man, "Stand there," or "Sit by my footstool;" haven't you shown partiality among yourselves, and become judges with evil thoughts? Listen, my beloved brothers. Didn't God choose those who are poor in this world to be rich in faith, and heirs of the Kingdom which he promised to those who love him?

James 2:1-5 WEB

The concept that God has a "preferential option for the poor" comes from the late Twentieth Century writings and work of various Latin American priests under the common title of liberation theology. The idea is that Mosaic Law, the prophets, Jesus Himself, and the apostles all gave preference to helping vulnerable elements of society beginning with the poor, widows, orphans, immigrants and anyone else victimized by deliberate, structured, institutionalized injustice and oppression. In fact, some of the more extreme proponents of liberation theology proposed that finding God can only be accomplished through gaining solidarity with the poor in personal participation with them in their destitution and suffering.

If you doubt the assertion that God cares especially for the marginalized and downtrodden of the earth, read again the Beatitudes of Jesus (Matthew 5). In this monologue Jesus confers comfort, deliverance, and membership in His kingdom to the poor in spirit and those who mourn as they meekly and hungrily thirst for righteousness. He offers mercy to the merciful; the ability to see God to the pure in heart, membership in His family and kingdom to the peacemakers and those persecuted for righteousness's sake. Doesn't this outpouring of Divine blessing to those meek mourners of the earth read as if God cared especially for them?

Some liberation theologians call these "the crucified people" because society has done to them exactly what was done to Jesus as He groaned in agony for his simple desire to bring salvation, justice, and deliverance to His people. And more than a few Latin American priests paid with their lives for their opposition to the entrenched economic, political, and social yoke of the existing patrician, corrupt, arrogant domination system of large landholders and resource exploiters.

Perhaps it's explained best by Dom Helder Camara, the archbishop of Recife, Brazil during a period of military dictatorship and repression, who said: "When I feed the poor, they call me a saint; when I ask why they are poor, they call me a communist."

Today the concept of a preferential option for the poor is here again in statements made by Pope Francis to the effect that the church and society need new focus on the earth's billions of vulnerable, suffering people. Some 2.5 billion people (about 40 percent) exist on less than \$2 daily. Most of them exist in squalid urban slums or as marginal sharecroppers on land seized from rightful owners during the colonial period of European and American domination several centuries ago.

Pope Francis understands the need for advocacy as well as charity. He knows why God chose the poor as a vehicle through which to reveal himself to humanity. And he comprehends why God has a special place in his heart for the poor: They are rich in faith because they have to be, since society has appropriated or denied almost everything else they have or might believe in.

We in the church today could learn much from the poor by focusing less on their dysfunction and more on their continued oppression by a system deliberately structured to "devise evil by law," as Psalm 94:20 says.

Yes, the poor have many problems, some of their own making. But they are still the children of God, and the sooner we learn this, the more stable will be the Republic in which we believe.