

## Option for the poor

*The Preferential Option for the Poor* (to give its full title) is a principle in Catholic Social Teaching which gives priority to the needs and rights of those who are economically disadvantaged and, as a result, suffer oppression and powerlessness. Based upon the dignity of the human person, this principle calls us to look first to those whose dignity is most often ignored, overlooked, at risk, or disdained. It draws attention to those who experience the failings of our social systems and encourages us to seek justice for them.

*“Preference implies the universality of God’s love, which excludes no one. It is only within the framework of this universality that we can understand the preference, ie what comes first...”*

*God has a preferential love for the poor not because they are necessarily better than others, morally or religiously, but simply because they are poor and living in an inhuman situation that is contrary to God’s will”. (Gutierrez) Hence “preferential, not exclusive...”*

“Option” – not as in style or subject options – but about making a firm and persevering commitment, a moral imperative. (Cf. Rahner’s *fundamental option* for the good.)

Popular perception tends to distinguish the [deserving from the undeserving poor](#) and so applies justice *according to deserts*. God’s justice is *according to needs*.

The option for the poor has been a developing theme in Catholic Social Teaching since Vatican II. The opening words of **Gaudium et Spes** are memorable: “The joys and the hopes, the griefs and the anxieties of the people of this age, especially those who are poor or in any way afflicted, these are the joys and hopes, the griefs and anxieties of the followers of Christ.” Here we see three principles of Catholic Social Teaching: human dignity, solidarity & especially concern for the poor.

In the spirit of Vatican II, the Latin American Bishops’ Conference (Medellin 1968 and Puebla 1979) challenged the Church to conversion, service and solidarity, referring to “a preferential, not exclusive, option for the poor”.

In *Populorum Progressio* (1967) Paul VI explored the nature of poverty, the conflicts produced between rich & poor and the urgent action needed in aid, trade and development. He explicitly criticises capitalism and the unrestricted right of private property.

*Pope Francis’ vision regarding the poor is powerful & very clear in Evangelii Gaudium (2013):*

*“There can be no room for doubt or for explanations which weaken so clear a message. Today and always the poor are the privileged recipients of the Gospel; and the fact that it is freely preached to them is a sign of the kingdom that Jesus came to establish. We have to state, without mincing words, that there is an inseparable bond between our faith and the poor. May we never abandon them.” (EG 48)*

*He reminds us: the Church exists to bring the good news of the gospel to all, but especially to the most vulnerable. That good news is the kingdom of God – the kingdom of love, justice, dignity and peace – which we are to make present in our world. (EG 176, 180-181)*

*Christ showed the special love God had for them in his heart: Blessed are you poor, yours is the kingdom of God (Luke 6:20); I was hungry and you gave me food to eat (Mt 25:5).*

*“That is why I want a poor Church for the poor... We need to allow ourselves to be evangelised by them. The new evangelisation is an invitation to acknowledge the saving*

*power at work in their lives and to put them at the centre of the Church's pilgrim way. We are called to find Christ in them, and to lend our voice to their causes.” (EG 198)*

*“Without the preferential option for the poor, the proclamation of the Gospel, which is itself the prime form of charity, risks being misunderstood or submerged by the ocean of words which daily engulfs us in today's society of mass communications.” (EG 199)*

*B.D.*