
Option for the Poor: Assessment and Implications

Gustavo Gutiérrez

*Gustavo Gutiérrez is widely considered to be the "doyen" of Latin American liberation theology. His seminal 1971 work, **Teología de la liberación**, has been translated into over seventeen languages, and remains a foundational formulation of this critical theological development. Father Gutiérrez is presently Director of the Bartolomé de las Casas Institute in Lima, Peru.*

Twenty-six years ago, in the summer of 1967, during Expo '67 and General DeGaulle's visit, I gave a two-week course at the Faculty of Theology at the University of Montreal. The theme focused on the church and the problems of poverty, the same theme which I address in this presentation.¹ At that time, I made the most of the opportunity, barely two years after the Second Vatican Council, to work especially on the biblical and theological significance of poverty. It was one year before the expression "liberation theology" was to appear. I am able to say that the content of this theology originated in that course given in Montreal.

A Memory

I had the opportunity to go to the fourth session of Vatican II. During the final two days, I worked with a Chilean bishop, Monsignor Manuel Larraín, who was at that time President of the Episcopal Conference of Latin

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America (CELAM). Through his intermediary, I received an invitation to attend the closing of the Council, but I did not have the strength to go. During these two days, December 7–8, 1965, I made a personal retreat in my room, and there had the opportunity to listen on the radio to one of the most beautiful addresses of Pope Paul VI concerning the significance of the Council. At the time, however, I was experiencing, and here I borrow a French expression, *des sentiments mêlés* [mixed feelings]. On the one hand, I was very happy with a Council where the theology which I studied, and with which I self-identified, was so clearly expressed. On the other hand, I experienced a great sense of disquiet because the great challenges of my Latin American people were not represented. A concern for poverty was not very evident at the Council, nor was a concern for the highly conflictual situation which we were experiencing in Latin America. The European side of me, so to speak, was satisfied; but my Latin American side, more Amerindian, was rather confused, expecting something else.

I remember very well that it was after those two days of spiritual experience that I started to distance myself somewhat from the theology which I had worked on and read so passionately. I had just lived through my first years of pastoral work, and had sensed in Latin America, and particularly in my own country, Peru, a reality which did not correspond exactly to the results of the Council. Beyond some personal experience, it is this upon which I would like to reflect.

This presentation consists of three parts. The first provides a brief historical overview of what we call the *preferential option for the poor*. In the second part, I grapple with the meaning of this expression. Finally, in the third part, I focus very briefly on what we have recently begun to call the *new evangelization*—which is actually quite old.

Historical Overview

The speeches of Pope John XXIII at the Council can be summarized in one fundamental question with three main dimensions. The question was: “How are we to be able to say today ‘thy kingdom come’?” It was out of his distressing concern that the pope spoke of three major preoccupations, in particular his concern for the presence of the church in three worlds. First and foremost, he was concerned with the opening of the church to the modern world, which I am not going to develop at length because it is a familiar development. The preparatory documents of the Council, however, were not headed in this direction. But it is important to recall that they all were rejected, except for the one on liturgy, because they did not correspond to the intuitions of John XXIII. At the Council it was said, jokingly, that those preparatory documents had

been rejected thanks to the "red attack." It was not at all the communists of the time but merely seven cardinals, one of whom was Cardinal Liénart of Paris, who had contributed to the rejection of the preliminary outlines. These interventions permitted the drafting of the *Constitution on the Church in the Modern World*, in which the theme of opening the church itself to the modern world is central.

The second aspect concerning John XXIII was that of the presence of the church in another world: the Christian world, the world of ecumenical dialogue. Of course, this dialogue had begun several decades before the Council, but the Fathers accepted this papal concern and spread it to the religious world in general. From this concern we have the publication of documents about the great religions of humanity. The ecumenical dialogue was furthered by the presence of several Orthodox experts and Protestants at the Council, one of whom was Karl Barth.

But one month before the Council began (September 11, 1962) John XXIII delivered a speech in which he used the expression "another point of light." If one is relatively familiar with the texts of John XXIII, one will understand that each time he wants to speak of something important he speaks of a point of light, "*ponto luminoso*." While he does speak of another point of light, for goodness' sake we should not use Cartesian categories to find out which was the first. It was simply a means of attracting attention to what he wanted to say, namely, that "the church is, and wants to be, everyone's church, and especially the church of the poor." One cannot separate the church of the poor and the church of all believers.

The theme of poverty at the Council. John XXIII proposed this vision of the church at the Council as an essential topic. But the Fathers of the Council who had the most influence came more from the Northern countries, from Europe and from North America. They were concerned with the question of openness to the modern world. In fact, the Catholic church had not yet accepted such concepts as liberty, democratic spirit, as well as the sciences and their methodology. The majority of the Fathers were also preoccupied with ecumenical dialogue, for in the countries from which they came, the churches, especially the Protestant churches, were very strong, e.g., Germany, the United States, and Canada. These Fathers were so preoccupied with these two first issues that they tended to forget the concern of the church for the poor within the context which I have just described.

During the last two days of the first session of the Council, a very close friend of Pope John XXIII, Cardinal Lercaro, Archbishop of Bologna and one of the Council's secretaries, made an intervention in which he affirmed that "the theme of the Council must be evangelization of the poor and poverty in the world." Lercaro specified—and here we have the

discourse in its totality—"it is not one of the themes but the theme of the Council." He continued: "If we take this point, then we will be able to address the question of ecumenism and openness to the world." Imagine if the Council had accepted Lercaro's proposition; we would have had as the central theme, for the Catholic church, poverty in the world and the evangelization of the poor. The Council Fathers were moved listening to Cardinal Lercaro, but, alas, "it was too good to be true." The preoccupations were otherwise. Two other cardinals who were very important at the time, Cardinal Suenens of Belgium and Cardinal Montini (who shortly after would become pope) emphasized instead the two first concerns—especially the first, that of openness to the world.

We find, in the conciliar documents, several passages about poverty. Thus in *Lumen Gentium* (8) we read, "The church, like its founder, lives in persecution and poverty." Moreover, we read in one of the best texts from the Council, the decree on mission, *Ad Gentes* (5), "The church must take the road of poverty to announce the gospel." This is good, albeit meagre. Yet we can understand this timid presence of the theme of poverty in the conciliar documents. Let us not be anachronistic. It would be easy today to fault the Council. But the people at the time had other concerns. The subject of poverty, of the church of the poor, was not yet as important in the ecclesial conscience as it would later become.

In 1968, three years after the Council, the second meeting of the Episcopal Conference of Latin American, CELAM, took place in Medellín, Colombia. At this conference, the third intuition of Pope John XXIII was very prominent. This is not that surprising, given that the only countries which are both predominantly poor and Christian are situated in Latin America.² In Latin America, we take up again this third intuition of John XXIII. I think that the most important development of the Medellín conference was to see one church, that of Latin America, become an "adult."

Medellín and the meaning of poverty. At Medellín, not only did we talk about Latin American poverty, but we also indicated the causes of this poverty. This is why we talked about liberation: poverty and liberation were the two main themes. We wanted to clarify the meaning of the term "poverty." The first point concerns what we call "real poverty" which we Christians have the bad habit of calling material poverty. This vision is

2. I say predominantly because proportionately there are substantial numbers of Christians in Africa; but for historical reasons which are widely known, they are not, proportionally speaking, that significant. This is not the case in Asia where Christians are a minority. The only continent, therefore, where we find poverty and a predominant Christian faith is Latin America.

foreign to biblical vocabulary. It is true that we are dependent on Greek philosophy where the distinction between matter and spirit prevails. But material poverty is real poverty, concrete, everyday poverty. This poverty is a scandal, an evil, as Medellín reminded us.

A second point of clarification concerns what we are in the habit of calling spiritual poverty, not comprised first and foremost by detachment in relation to material goods, but rather by spiritual childhood. To put our lives back in the hands of God: such is the meaning of spiritual poverty, the most significant meaning in Christian revelation. This poverty permits us to recognize God as love, Father, Mother; to recognize other people as sisters and brothers; to accept, therefore, the free love of God.

Poverty as commitment is the last point revealed at Medellín: solidarity with the poor in the struggle against poverty; a commitment to the poor and against poverty. As is widely known, Medellín was a very prophetic voice in the life of the Latin American church. I do not claim—and besides it is never like this—that the church as a whole, or that the entire Latin American church, followed in the footsteps of Medellín. I would have liked them to, but the opposition to a commitment such as this is well-known. This matters little; it was an important voice which made possible a good number of experiments and projects. This vision was finally confirmed and ratified at Puebla, Mexico, where the Latin American church spoke in 1979 of the preferential option for the poor. This expression is composed of three terms: poor, option and preference. The “poverty” of which we speak is material poverty, the “preference,” spiritual poverty, and the “option,” the commitment against poverty. In Santo Domingo in 1992, along with many other issues, the Latin American bishops ratified this vision. Santo Domingo reiterated that the Latin American church had different pastoral themes but only one option.

I emphasize this because the preliminary documents spoke of at least eight or ten preferential options (inflation always brings devaluation). Santo Domingo reaffirmed one option and the different pastoral themes which grew out of this option. I shall now end this historical overview and move on to an explanation of the content of the expression “preferential option for the poor.”

The Preferential Option for the Poor

The best way to grasp the implications of this expression is to break it down word by word: poverty, preference and option.

Poverty. What is this poverty of which we speak when we use the expression “preferential option for the poor”? It is very clear. Poverty consists of economic, social and political dimensions but it is certainly more than that. In the final analysis, poverty signifies death. It is death, unfair

death, the premature death of the poor; physical death. It is unfortunately not only in Latin America that people die of illnesses which medicine has already cured. There is no reason for someone to die from cholera, but cholera kills people in Peru, my country, and kills other people in other parts of the world, in Asia and elsewhere. In Peru a joke is going around which is a bit sarcastic and black in humour: "cholera is one illness which has opted for the poor." Cholera kills the poor, and only the poor, because if one has a bit of money, one can boil water and this very fragile virus dies at 60 degrees Celsius. As is evident, it is easy to protect oneself from cholera, but many people have no money, not even enough to boil their water.

Poverty, therefore, causes physical death, but one must also speak of a cultural death as well. When a people is not appreciated, when it is scorned in one way or another, in a certain sense one kills those who belong to this people. We have different races, different cultures and different languages in Latin America. If one misunderstands these cultures and races, one kills the people who belong to these social groups. Anthropologists like to say that culture is life; if you scorn the culture, you scorn life. Very often cultural death accompanies physical death. In this way, when we do not recognize the fullness of human rights of women, they are no longer women at the cultural level, for we do not fully recognize them as human beings with rights which belong to them. Thus poverty signifies death. In saying this, I do not want to overshadow the social, economic or political dimensions. Rather, I want to stress the meaning of this social, economic and political poverty to convey to you that ultimately it is life which is in question. That is why, in Christian communities in Latin America, we speak often of the "God of Life" and we reject the opposite: physical and cultural death as well as other manifestations of selfishness and sin.

What then do we mean by "the poor"? I think that there really isn't a good definition. I think that a good way to speak of the poor is to say that the poor are the insignificant, those who do not count in society and very often in the Christian churches as well. The poor person is one who must wait a week at the hospital doors to see a doctor. A poor person is one who has no social clout to change this situation. The poor person is the insignificant one who has no economic clout, who belongs to a spurned race, and who has been culturally marginalized. The poor are socially insignificant, except before God. They are always present through statistics, but they have no names.

I will give you an example which may seem a bit cruel. I took part in the funeral of Archbishop Oscar Romero [of El Salvador] whom I knew well. It is calculated that during his funeral 40 people were killed in the central plaza of the San Salvador Cathedral. We know very well Oscar

Romero's name because he was an Archbishop, a great man, of course. But we do not know the names of these 40 people who died in order to see Romero one last time. Beside me, in the cathedral, I saw five dead women, another severely wounded, but still alive; I heard her and I could thus do something for her. We do not know the names of these people because they are poor just as much in life as in death. In saying this, of course, I say nothing against Archbishop Romero, but I am saying quite simply that if one occupies an important place in the church, which is an institution, one is not exactly insignificant. But we do not know the names of the poor. They remain anonymous.

Another example. Sometimes people say to me: "You, a Latin American, are a poor person. I am sorry." I try to be involved with the poor, and I live in a poor neighbourhood. But I am not a poor person, because I am not insignificant. And I am not insignificant because I am a priest and a theologian in my free time. I would be lying if I said that I am insignificant in my country. It would be false modesty. It is better to recognize what one is and with a certain humility try to be close or near to the poor.

Finally, to conclude this section on poverty, it is necessary to clarify this point: if you speak about the poor, people will probably respond by telling you that you are very generous. But if you speak of the reasons for poverty, people may say to themselves, "Is this person a Christian, or rather is he not more a politician?" At a Eucharistic Congress in Philadelphia, a very significant person in the church today essentially said: "I come from a poor country; you Americans, you are rich, help us." The participants applauded for five minutes. At the same Congress, Dom Helder Camara [formerly Archbishop of Recife, Brazil] affirmed: "I come from a poor continent, Latin America. Our poverty is largely the result of the multinational corporations which work in our country and your country helps the multinationals." The audience applauded in a very polite manner. He had not said: "Help us," but "Change, try to change your government."

Preference. I have often met people who found it strange to use the term "preference." Would it not be preferable to say quite simply option for the poor? On the contrary, it is a matter of a Christian term which compels one to preserve the universality of God's love from whom no one is excluded. It is simply within this context of universality that one can understand the "preference," that is to say, "who is first." The Bible speaks of God's preference for the poor. Why in Genesis did God prefer Abel to Cain? It doesn't say that Abel was better, a very good person, and that Cain was a bad person. But Abel was the second one; he had less human weight. God preferred Abel's sacrifice to that of Cain's. Cain's sin was not to have accepted God's preference for Abel. It is for this reason

that Cain killed Abel. The refusal of preference is not to understand that one must hold together the universality of God's love and God's preference for the poorest. It was already in the expression of John XXIII, "the church of all and particularly the church of the poor." As Christians we cannot say that "only the poor count." This attitude is not Christian for it does not entail loving everyone. Holding the two aspects is not easy. It is a great challenge.

But why this preference? One can easily say that it is my social analysis which permits me to understand poverty and to prefer the poorest. This analysis is admittedly useful but it is not enough. Or again, one can say that it is necessary to prefer the poor out of human compassion. Human compassion is very important, but it is also not enough. Or again one can say that I speak this way about the poor because I am Latin American. I always respond to these people: "Listen, try not to understand me too quickly. If I speak of poverty, it is in the first place because I am a Christian, in the second place because I am Latin American. If I speak of poverty, it is because I am a Christian and if you are Christians, do the same." The question of geography, no matter how important, comes second. Finally, we hear it said that we must prefer the poor because they are good. There are some poor persons, in fact, who are very good, but also some who are very bad. I do not advise you to come to my church at two o'clock in the morning, for example. It is dangerous.

We must prefer the poor, first because God is good and secondly because God prefers the most forgotten, the oppressed, the poor, the abandoned. The ultimate, final reason for "preference" is the God of our faith. This affirmation is very engaging because we believe in the same God. What I have just said applies to North Americans as well; you cannot escape this preference for the poor. How to do it? This is another question. But if we believe in the same God, then we must walk together historically. Preference comes from the goodness of God and comes from the free love of God, the central notion of the gospel message. God loved us first. Our life, our lives, are responses to this free initiative of God. It is the significance of a free gift like that which characterizes parental love, of a mother for her children.

The great mystics, such as St. John of the Cross, teach us how the "God-freely-touched" is at the heart of the spiritual life. This is not at odds with social and political engagement. But without contemplation, without prayer, we have no Christian life. Moreover, without solidarity with the poor we have no Christian life either. We have thus two dimensions which it is necessary to try to hold together.

Option. One sometimes hears this sort of observation: the option for the poor is something that those who are not poor must do. We forget that

the poor themselves must also make the option for their sisters and brothers. It often happens that some of the poor have made an option not for the poor, but for their family and for themselves. The option is a universal imperative. It is a decision which concerns all Christians; everyone must make this option.

The New Evangelization

If one day someone asked me what the most important perspective is of the theology which I do in Latin America, liberation theology, I would answer that it is the preferential option for the poor. Liberation theology can disappear as far as I am concerned, provided that this option remains. Until the age of 40, I never spoke of liberation theology. I was then a Christian, or I tried to be one; and I hope to be one just as much after liberation theology. I do not believe in liberation theology; I believe in Jesus Christ. A theology is a means for understanding my faith. It is not an article of my faith, of my creed. Theology has an important place, but only within its place.

I remember very well a Colombian Jesuit who approached me one day, saying that he had to write a theological thesis in Rome. "I would like," he said to me, "to do my thesis on liberation theology." (Liberation theology is also very useful for doing doctoral theses. That is why, when one asks me, what has it brought to the church? I reply: "Many doctors.") This Jesuit took a piece of paper and a pencil, saying to me: "Can you tell me the main themes of liberation theology?" I answered him: "The themes are: God, the Trinity, freedom, the sacraments, the church, grace, sin, the Virgin Mary." He said to me: "Are you making fun of me?" I replied: "No, all theology is revelation; the subjects are the same. Theologies are different in relation to the same themes, but not in the themes themselves." In the manner of treating a theme, there have been some differences in theology during the course of two thousand years. I do not think that liberation theology is something permanent. No theology should be, and it is even undesirable if a theology lasts too long. We have had an experience of this in the church. If this preference for the poor remains, we will have won something important because it is profoundly tied to biblical revelation. To re-teach the world this option would be a major achievement of the theology of the Latin American church.

The preferential option for the poor is the axis of what we call the new evangelization. The expression is well-known; it is fashionable. What we know perhaps less is that it appeared in the Medellín documents of 1968. The documents speak of the need, in Latin America, of a new evangelization. This was a kind of realization, one of living a different historical moment, in a different social and cultural context, which demands a new

schema for proclaiming the gospel. A “new” evangelization demands a “new” vision of the world. Otherwise, this expression risks being emptied of its “newness.” In my continent, we have been talking about this new evangelization for 25 years.

As for myself, I think the Latin American church is living its richest historical moment. Rich does not mean easy, for we have a painful richness: martyrs and many Christians have given their lives for the preferential option on behalf of the poor. This is the case for Archbishop Romero, bishop of El Salvador, of Angeli in Argentina, and Ignacio Ellacuria in Salvador. When a church is capable of having among its members people who live their life in this way, something important is happening to this church. There are “significant” people assassinated, and yet so many other people who work—and are killed—anonymously.

Liberation theologians belong to a celebrated world, as representatives of the Latin American church. As theologians, we have contacts; we can be guests. When someone gives us an honorary doctorate, for example, we can reach a North American audience. But I think that the Latin American church has others who represent what is really being lived there. I will relate a more or less personal experience. About four years ago, I had gone to meet with a pastoral team formed around some priests, including a Canadian priest, and some nuns. In this area, there were all kinds of violence—terrorism, violence from drugs, and even from the army. We spent a night in discussion. The pastoral team presented their problems to me, and I tried to suggest a solution: “No, no,” they would say, “We already tried that, it doesn’t work.” “Well do this.” “That doesn’t work either.” So around four o’clock in the morning, I said to them: “Listen, I am truly moved. Allow me to tell you a story. At the moment when the plane leaves the airport, the pilot communicates with the control tower to inform them that the plane has run into difficulty. The officer in the control tower says to him: “Do this.” “No, I can’t for such and such a reason,” the pilot responds. “Do this, head for the water.” “I can’t, I don’t have any gas, etc.” So the officer in the control tower finally says: “Say with me: ‘Our Father, who art in heaven....’”

That night, with the pastoral team, I was in the control tower. I suggested to them to say the Lord’s Prayer. These people are unknown; they will never be quoted in the newspapers; no one asks them what their problems are in the church. In light of the suffering of my people, I am ashamed to speak of my difficulties; it is because of this that I always try to avoid the question, “What should we do?” My neighbours are suffering in my neighbourhood because they cannot bring food to their children. This pastoral team suffers. Its pastoral work, to human eyes, is not efficient because the situations are incredibly difficult.

When I meet people like this, I nourish my faith and my hope. A church which is capable of giving birth to teams like that one has a very great generosity. I do not pretend that the Latin American church as a whole is engaged on the Medellín path, that this church is completely in solidarity with the poor. I simply want to say that there are nevertheless some very beautiful things being done, not necessarily because of liberation theology, although one must acknowledge that this is an important factor, but because of generosity. Some people who come to my country to see me—today I am part of an “ecclesial tourism” in my country—ask me what impact liberation theology has had on Latin America. My reply is always the same: “You know, the response doesn’t interest me; what interests me is the impact of the gospel, and the presence of Christians in the process of the liberation of the Latin American people. And within this process, there is a small role for liberation theology.” In saying this, I do not pretend to distance myself elegantly in relation to liberation theology. I continue to work in it; I think that it is a useful instrument, in its place, in order to favour concrete engagements in a church which must be more and more engaged with the poor. I think that this theology ultimately arises from the contrast between a reality marked by poverty and thus by death, and the necessity to proclaim the resurrection of Jesus Christ. Never, in the Bible, is the resurrection of Jesus called a “miracle,” for the word miracle is too small for talking about the resurrection of Jesus. It is described rather as the victory over death.

You recall that line from the Hebrew scriptures which St. Paul repeats: “Death, where is your victory?” Every Christian celebration is a mockery of death to affirm that death is not the last word in history. Life is the last word of human existence. I think that it is this which is taking place in the Latin American church. For this reason, theological reflection has some value because it is sustained by the life of a church or by a large part of this church. Otherwise, it would not have much meaning outside the intellectual world.

I will close in a way which is not very academic and I will ask simply for prayers for my continent. But if one takes into account the poor of the world, one is already in the position to find one’s place in this preferential option for the poor.