

THE GOSPEL MESSAGE AND THE PRIMACY OF THE OPTION FOR THE POOR

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1. INTRODUCTION

The Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World, *Gaudium et Spes* (GS) sets the agenda for the Church's teaching and care for the poor in the Post-Conciliar era, thus: "The joy and hope, the grief and anguish of the men and women of our time, especially of those who are poor or afflicted in any way, are the joy and hope, the grief and anguish of the followers of Christ as well."¹ This introductory verse of *GS* gives a message of **solidarity of the Church with the whole human family**; the preference to the poor, vulnerable and marginalized and to whose anguish, echoes in a more profound way in the heart of the Church. According to Francis Oborji, this magisterial teaching reassesses the evangelizing mission of bringing integral salvation inaugurated in Christ to the human person and the whole human family.² Since poverty has driven masses of people to the edges of society, or even worse, to extinction,³ the Church's care of the poor is not a merely social service which others could as well do, but it is rooted in the very nature of the Church.

In accentuating **those affected by poverty as first to be considered**, Pope St. John Paul II affirms that the Church by virtue of her evangelical duty, feels called to take her stand beside the poor, to discern the justice of their requests, and to help satisfy them, without losing sight of the good of groups in the context of the common good.⁴ As invitation for solidarity, Pope Paul VI recalled that “on the face of every human being, especially when marked by tears and sufferings, we can and must see the face of Christ the Son of Man”(cf. Mt. 25:40).⁵ Therefore, we are poised to explicate the terms: Gospel message, option and the notion of the “poor.” We shall discuss what option for the poor means, the Gospel message and the primacy for the option for the poor and give an evaluation and conclusion.

2. EXPLICATION OF TERMS

2.1 GOSPEL MESSAGE

The word Gospel literally means “Good News.” It is a word of Anglo-Saxon origin, meaning God’s spell, i.e., word of God, rather, according to others, good spell, i.e., good news. It is the rendering of the Greek *evangelion*, i.e., “good message.” Gospel refers to the teaching or revelation of Christ. Thus, Gospel message is the record of Christ’s life and teaching in the first four books of the New Testament. It is the gratuitous promise of the remission of sins for Christ’s sake. The whole Gospel message and doctrine of salvation are chiefly efficacious for contrition, faith, justification, renewal and sanctification as it deals with facts of revelation and experience. The

Gospel is not only a message of salvation, but also the instrument through which the Holy Spirit works (Romans 1:16).

2.2 OPTION

Emmanuel Asuquo Akpan defines option as “decision”, “intention”, “choice”, or “life’s orientation”.⁶ As a corollary, Donal Corr sees the word ‘option’ as suggesting a personal choice. For him, this personal choice is not essentially an act of private asceticism or even of face-to-face compassion for a poor person; rather, it is specifically a response at the level of the wider society as a whole, a response to the unjust ordering of society.⁷ Therefore, it makes sense only in the context of an awareness of how society is in fact structured.

2.3 THE NOTION “POOR”: ETYMOLOGY, BIBLICAL AND RELATED PERSPECTIVES

Etymologically, the term poor comes from several Hebrew words and from the Greek etymology *ptöchoi*.⁸ These several Hebrew words lack the sufficient evidence to explain more clearly, the term poor. *Ptöchos*, the Septuagint translation of *ânî* gives a more forceful and clearer explanation to the understanding of what the notion poor means. Literally, *ânî* means “afflicted”; and the affliction consists in membership of a lower class which is indigent and subject to oppression with no power to defend itself. The related word *ânaw* is synonymous, but is more frequently used of the poor in a religious sense.⁹

In the **Biblical perspective**, first, in the **Old Testament**, the poor were the victims of oppression regarded as the *'ébyôn'* or the *'anawim'* that cannot provide for themselves and were treated unjustly by authorities.¹⁰ The prophetic literature rebuked this rejection of their basic human dignity (Amos 2:7; 4:1; 5:11; Isaiah 3:5). In the **New Testament** (especially in Matthew 5:3), the poor are called blessed, more precisely the "poor in spirit" and the duty of giving to the poor is praised and raised to almost the same level as the duty of human beings to God. Jesus authenticated this missionary liberation in his inaugural speech to those who lack the basic needs of life (the poor) for a dignified living. This speech launched his public ministry: "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim liberty to captives, sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim a year of favour from the Lord." (Luke 4:18). The groups Jesus is talking about here, were communities of the poor which existed as a result of the unjust social structures of the time. Jesus' solidarity with them consists in proclaiming to them the Good News of their liberation as he delivers them from their physical, moral, and spiritual miseries.¹¹

On other related nuances, the word "poor" could be understood first in the context of the present study, referring to those who are lacking basic needs of life in varying degrees. Second, it could mean the "rich-poor"; that is, those who, though rich in the things of this world, are poor in the things of the spirit. Third, we have the evangelical poor; these are the religious who look up to God alone

for the sake of the Kingdom of God.¹² In this study, we shall focus our attention on the poor in the first group.

2.4 OPTION FOR THE POOR

According to Michael Glazier, the preferential option for the poor was institutionalized at the Episcopal conference at Medellín (1968), enthusiastically endorsed at Puebla (1979), and confirmed as a principle for the whole Church by Pope John Paul II in his encyclical, *Laborem Exercens* (1981).¹³ Donal Dorr adds that the notion of an option for the poor developed in Latin America as Church leaders there, began to implement the renewal sparked off by Vatican II. At the heart of this option was essentially the commitment to make the Church itself more just and participative; in this very poor and oppressed groups that their dignity and value be recognized by being listened to, and could have a practical experience of being empowered by participating in decision-making.¹⁴ Sequel to this, Albert Nolan better emphasizes the points that:

The option for the poor is not a choice about the *recipients* of the *Gospel Message*, to whom we must preach the Gospel; it is a matter of what *Gospel* we preach to anyone at all. It is concerned with the *content* of the Gospel Message itself. To make an option for the poor is simply to commit oneself to justice and therefore to take up the cause of the poor in their struggle for justice.¹⁵

Thus, an option for the poor is a commitment by individual Christians and the Christian community at every level, to engage actively in a struggle to overcome the social injustices which mar our world. It is to draw near to the poor in order to accompany and serve them from all forms of oppression.

2.5 THE GOSPEL MESSAGE AND THE PRIMACY OF THE OPTION FOR THE POOR

Pope Paul VI in *Octogesima Adveniens* remarks that a renewed consciousness of the demands of Gospel makes it the Church's duty to convince everyone that solidarity in actions is a matter of urgency.¹⁶ The objective of the preferential option for the poor is to proclaim the Saviour, an evangelization that seeks for liberation from all the sufferings and enslavements of human existence. Paul VI in his encyclical letter, *Populorum Progressio* speaks of an integral development of the poor through the promotion of each person, the whole person and indeed the entire humanity. He rebuffed emphatically the restriction of development to economic growth alone.¹⁷ In His Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, Paul VI also says that evangelization is incomplete without the care for the poor, because the two are intimately connected in the anthropological, theological and evangelical order.¹⁸ In his encyclical letter *Redemptoris Missio*, Pope St. John Paul II says that the Church's mission consist essentially in offering people an opportunity not to "have more" but to "be more" by awakening their consciences through the Gospel. He also encouraged the world to

“fight hunger by changing lifestyles” because this is a motto which has appeared in the Church circles and which shows the people of the rich nations how to become brothers and sisters of the poor.¹⁹ *Ipsa facto*, the Church's love for the poor is inspired by the Gospel of the Beatitudes, by the poverty of Jesus and by his attention to the poor. This love concerns material poverty and also the numerous forms of cultural and religious poverty.

Therefore, the primacy of the option for the poor is a **challenge** for all messengers of the Gospel. It is a **free commitment** of decision which is not option in the sense that a Christian need not necessarily make it, but to create conditions for the marginalized voices to be heard, to defend the defenseless and to assess lifestyles, policies, social institutions in terms of their influence on the world of the poor. This connotes both being for the poor and being with the poor. The option for the poor **demand everyone to realize** the plight of those who struggle to survive and to put the needs of these most vulnerable members of the society ahead of individual selfish interests. For this service of the poor to be both evangelical and evangelizing, it must faithfully reflect the attitude of Jesus, who came “to proclaim Good News to the poor” (Luke 4:18).

3. EVALUATION

Deducing from the forgone, it is a comprehensible detail that the **primacy of the option for the poor** is not a slogan that places one group or class against another, e.g. rich against poor, black against white, educated against illiterate; rather, it calls for solidarity and

justice. This is the major reason why the Compendium stresses emphatically that:

... the preferential option for the poor should be reaffirmed in all its force. —This is an option or a special form of primacy in the exercise of Christian charity, to which the whole tradition of the Church bears witness. It affects the life of each Christian inasmuch as he or she seeks to imitate the life of Christ, but it applies equally to our social responsibilities and hence to our manner of living, and to the logical decisions to be made concerning the ownership and use of goods.²⁰

Thus, the link between the care of the poor and evangelization is a necessary one. It consists of the fact that the mission to preach the Gospel and the care to the poor, concerns the salvation of the total person, soul and body. Therefore, to separate the works of development from the love which prompts them and which is preached in the Gospel is to deny the profound unity of Christian involvement. This is the major reason the Church's care of the poor is part of her participation in the event of Christ; the event which gives meaning and fulfillment to this world and to history. This event continues to receive its progressive and successive fulfillment through the mission of the Church; the Church's care of the poor.

4. CONCLUSION

The Conciliar document, *Gaudium et Spes* teaches that socio-economic and political concerns have vital links with evangelization. The Church in the contemporary world, as it reflects on and pursues its mission of salvation, cannot neglect becoming actively involved in the efforts for the development of the poor.²¹ Thus, it is deducible that the primacy of the love of the poor and vulnerable is a viewpoint that we can measure the quality of justice in any society by the way its poorest and vulnerable are treated. Catholic Social Teaching makes a clarion call for all to discern, listen, see and respond to the cry of the poor through our words and actions. It is indeed a truism that the Church cannot stand aloof to the cry of the poor because "her love for the poor is part of her constant tradition."²² Those affected by poverty are first. This is what **PRIMACY** means. This allows us to set the poor as a priority and reinvigorate a certain spirit of standing by/for the poor and the vulnerable, being a voice for the voiceless and fighting structural injustice that produces poverty. For in doing this, we adhere to the teaching of "Christ who became poor and was always close to the poor and the outcast."²³

END NOTES

¹ *Concilium Oecumenicum Vaticanum II, Constitutio Dogmatico, Gaudium et Spes*, 7 December 1965, n. 1 in AAS 51, (1964), 97-138.

² FRANCIS ANEKWE OBORJI, "The Church and Practice of Charity to the Poor: a Missiological Appraisal," in Uzochukwu Njoku & Anyanwu Simon, *In the*

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³JOHN PAUL II, *Go in Peace: A Gift of Enduring Love*, Chicago: Loyola Press, 2003, 174.

⁴JOHN PAUL II, *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis, on Social Concern*, Nairobi: Paulines, 1987, n. 39.

⁵Address at the Final Public Session of the Vatican Council, (December 7, 1965: AAS 58 (1966), 58.

⁶EMMANUEL ASUQUO AKPAN, *A Companion for Pastoral Administration in Pastoral Dogmatic Moral and Legal Materials*, Ikot Ekpene: Edi-Max printers, 1999, 219.

⁷DONAL CORR, *Option for the Poor*, New York: Orbis Books, 1992, 3.

⁸J. DUNN, *Jesus Remembered*, Grand Rapids, Michigan: William Eerdmans Publishing, 2003, 136.

⁹FRANCIS ANEKWE OBORJI, "The Church...", 171.

¹⁰EMMANUEL CHUKWUEMEKA UMEH, *Opting for the Poor*, Enugu: Snaap Press, 2004, 24.

¹¹FRANCIS ANEKWE OBORJI, "The Church...", 172.

¹²FRANCIS ANEKWE OBORJI, "The Church...", 170.

¹³MICHAEL GLAZIER AND MONIKA K. HELLWIG, *The Modern Catholic Encyclopedia*, Revised and Expanded Edition, Collegeville, Minnesota: Liturgical Press, 2004, 595.

¹⁴DONAL DORR, *Option...*, 1.

¹⁵DONAL DORR, *Option...*, 2-3.

¹⁶PAUL VI, *Octogesima Adveniens*, Encyclical Letter on New Social Problems, Nairobi: Paulines, 1990, n. 5

¹⁷PAUL VI, *Populorum Progressio*, Encyclical Letter on the Development of Peoples, Nairobi: Paulines, 1995, n. 14

¹⁸PAUL VI, *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, Encyclical Letter on Evangelization in the Modern World, (Nigeria: St. Paul Publication, 2015. n. 29-31

¹⁹JOHN PAUL II, *Redemptoris Missio, Encyclical Letter on the Permanent Validity of the Church's Missionary Mandate*, Nairobi: Paulines, 1991, n. 58-59.

²⁰PONTIFICAL COUNCIL FOR JUSTICE AND PEACE, *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church*, (Rome: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2004), 182.

²¹*Concilium Oecumenicum Vaticanum II, Constitutio Gaudium et Spes...*, n. 26 in AAS 51, (1964), 97-138.

²²THE CATECHISM OF THE CATHOLIC CHURCH, Nairobi: Paulines Publications, 1994, n. 2444

²³FRANCIS, *Evangelii Gaudium*, Apostolic Exhortation on the Joy of the Gospel, Rome: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2013, n. 186.