

## “CHURCH OF THE POOR”: REVISITING THE *CATHOLIC SOCIAL TEACHINGS OF THE CHURCH*

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### INTRODUCTION

The Church is always mindful of the conditions of the people in the society. She has the mission to proclaim the Gospel not only to those who are privileged and fortunate in life but also those who are poor, marginalized, deprived, and voiceless in the society. Social issues are also of prime concern of the Church. It is always part of her responsibility to address some issues of importance especially on poverty. In fact, Paul VI positively confirms,

Our predecessors in their great encyclicals, Leo XIII in *Rerum Novarum*, Pius XI in *Quadragesimo Anno* and John XXIII in *Mater et Magistra* and *Pacem in Terris* – not to mention the messages of Pius XII to the world – did not fail in the duty of their office of shedding the light of the Gospel on the social questions of their times.<sup>1</sup>

These words are assurance that at the heart of the Church’s concern are the people at large. Nobody is left behind. The Church is still loyal to her mission to proclaim the Good News to all especially to the poor. Gustavo Gutierrez contends,

We did not have to wait for the twentieth century to become aware of the important issue of poverty. At Medellin (Brazil), it was possible in a region both poor and Christian to take seriously the intuition of Pope John XXIII that the *Church is and wants to be the Church of the poor*.<sup>2</sup>

This study presents the understanding of the *Church of the Poor* as it is expounded by the Church documents. It traces its origin, content, foundation, and practical application admonishes by the Church herself. It points out to the core value and central basis as to what it pertains. The concept of the “Church of the Poor” has its own development. In fact, Bishop Labayen says,

The phrase *Church of the Poor* was first used by Pope John XXIII in his inaugural address to the Fathers of the Vatican Council in 1962. It was later picked up by Asian Bishops at their historic first meeting in Manila in 1970. Finally, it became the core message of the Second Plenary Council of the Philippines (PCP II) in 1991.<sup>3</sup>

Thus, the *Church of the Poor* is an identity of the whole mystical Body of Christ. It has a rich history and development. The Church never forgets this identity. John Paul II says that “the Church is firmly committed to their cause, for she considers it her mission, her service, a proof of her fidelity to Christ, so that she can be the ‘Church of the Poor.’”<sup>4</sup>

This study considers the *Catholic Social Teachings of the Church* as one of the main sources of understanding the “Church of the Poor”. It also includes some Pastoral Letters and theological commentaries from authors or writers and theologians that might as well elucidate the topic under consideration.<sup>5</sup>

## II. Church of the Poor

The “Church of the Poor” is not just a concept that the Church adopted and implemented.<sup>6</sup> It is a result of contemplation on the very mission of Christ himself. Labayen would actually put it in an analogical way in the divine election. Like the different biblical figures who receive new name so too with the Church as “Church of the Poor.” He says,

The Church is now called with a new name: the Church of the Poor. Her name is changed from the Christendom Church to the Church of the Poor. This change serves as a reminder of her divine election for a specific task and mission. A specific task and mission that implies, even demands from the Christendom model of Church, a conversion to the Jesus of the Gospel.<sup>7</sup>

First to use the phrase “Church of the Poor” was Pope John XXIII in his opening address to the Council Fathers of the Vatican II.

The Council ought to contribute/help in the diffusion of the social and communitarian content which is immanent/inherent to authentic Christianity in its entirety: only in this manner can the church present herself as the Church for all people (universal) and, above all, as the Church of the Poor.<sup>8</sup>

Through this opening remark, the term suggests an orientation how the Council should proceed in its task. It is seen here as a way of living. It is a way of being Church, of manifesting one's life as a follower and member of the Mystical Body of Christ.

First and foremost, it is a call to a **deeper practice of Christian living**. It is a disposition and attitude towards God and neighbor. “To become the Church of the Poor is indeed God’s call to Christian believers today. It is a call to which God expects His church to respond.”<sup>9</sup> It is the living of the good news that Christ preached to his disciples down to our generation. It is the witnessing of the gospel values wherever one is. The Church of the poor is called to witness to Jesus of Nazareth, who “for your sake he made himself poor though he was rich, so that you might become rich by his poverty.”<sup>10</sup> The Council Fathers reiterate the importance of becoming witnesses of Christ, they say, that “just as Christ carried out the work of redemption in poverty and oppression, so the Church is called to follow the same path if she is to communicate the fruits of salvation to men.”<sup>11</sup> So each and every one is called, invited, and encouraged to live the gospel in one’s daily endeavor.

Secondly, it is an invitation to **read the signs of the times**. In order to be able to respond efficiently and effectively to the needs of others, especially the poor and marginalized in the society. “Through the Holy Spirit, the Gospel penetrates the heart of the world, for it is He who causes people to discern the signs of the times, signs willed by God, which evangelization reveals and puts to use within history.”<sup>12</sup> Since the Church lives in history, she ought to “scrutinize the signs of the times and interpret them in the light of the Gospel.”<sup>13</sup> It is also an attempt to solve and find a way out for the problems of the Church and the society as a whole. Donald Dorr claims that “to read the signs of the times, specific ways in which God is speaking to today’s world and calling people to respond”<sup>14</sup> is very much needed in the society. All these can be read in the context of the Church of the Poor in her historical context.

Thirdly, it is a **duty** which God assigns to the Church in order to carry out the mission given by Christ. It is a duty of each and everyone to carry the mission to bring the gospel message to the ends of the world but most especially to those who are less privileged in the society.<sup>15</sup> A Church document states,

The duty to give every person the same right of access to the indispensable minimum to live on does not merely come from a moral imperative to share with the poor, which is already a major obligation. The duty is also to incorporate those living in poverty into the community as a whole, which without them, tends to wither and can eventually be destroyed....They must be placed at the very center of our concerns, at the center of human family.<sup>16</sup>

To be in solidarity with the poor is a real and deep obligation of all Christians and of the Church of the Poor.<sup>17</sup> In fact, the Church teaches that “when the demands of necessity and propriety have been sufficiently met, it is a duty to give to the poor out of that which remains.”<sup>18</sup> Moreover, the obligations to the one human family stretch across space and time. The commandment to love the neighbor invites everyone to consider the poor and marginalized of other nations as true brothers and sisters who share in the one table of life intended by God for the enjoyment of all.<sup>19</sup>

Fourthly, it is a call to **responsibility**. God gives everyone the task to put forward the gospel values such as charity, solidarity, peace, love, compassion, generosity, forgiveness, and concern to all. But this task is particularly addressed to those who have the capacity to help others in need especially those experiencing abandonment, rejection, neglect, and are disregarded in the community. In fact, here in the Philippines once again the Church calls for “the involvement with and for the poor necessarily called for greater lay participation and co-responsibility.”<sup>20</sup> The whole Church is called to commit herself to this noble task in caring for the poor “by expressing a deep concern for the poor and making a strong protest on their behalf.”<sup>21</sup>

### III. Theological Foundation

What is the basis of the concept of the “Church of the poor,” which became a way of deeper Christian living, reading the signs of the times, call to duty, and responsibility? All throughout history God never abandons His people. He was always with them. For God, His

people are important. They are precious in His eyes. He never gives them up. "Human persons are willed by God; they are imprinted with God's image. Their dignity does not come from the work they do, but from the persons they are."<sup>22</sup> Such is the importance of person in God's loving embrace. This love never tarnished even by the failure or sin of humanity. In fact, a document affirms,

The human person is the clearest reflection of God's presence in the world; all of the Church's work in pursuit of both justice and peace is designed to protect and promote the dignity of every person. For each person not only reflects God, but is the expression of God's creative work and the meaning of Christ's redemptive ministry.<sup>23</sup>

Moreover, God always protects those who are weak and suffering, the poor and abandoned. He has a special attention to them. He is the first one who cares for them. Boff and Pixley assert,

...before being something that concerns the Church, the option for the poor is something that concerns God. God is the first who opt for the poor and it is only a consequence of this that the Church too has to opt for the poor.<sup>24</sup>

This is the very challenge posed upon the members of the Church of Christ. It is a continuous call for all, that is, to opt for the poor and abandoned. This is a reality that everyone faces. Once again, a Church document emphasizes:

As followers of Christ, we are challenged to make a fundamental 'option for the poor' -- to speak for the voiceless, to defend the defenseless, to assess life styles, policies, and social institutions in terms of their impact on the poor. This 'option for the poor' does not mean pitting one group against another, but rather, strengthening the whole community by assisting those who are the most vulnerable. As Christians, we are called to respond to the needs of all our brothers and sisters, but those with the greatest needs require the greatest response.<sup>25</sup>

This is a strong pronouncement that all must be concerned with the need of others. It is hard and painful to see them in their miserable condition. Pope John Paul II adds that everyone is a gift to one another. He says, "God entrusts us to one another. Our freedom has a relational dimension; we find our fulfillment through the gift of self to others."<sup>26</sup> This call to be concerned with the poor is addressed to all. It is not just a responsibility of a few people chosen to lead the flock or those in the hierarchy alone. It is a universal concern. Every Christian is responsible for one's neighbor. The World Synod of Catholics Bishops puts it beautifully:

At the same time as it proclaims the Gospel of the Lord, its Redeemer and Savior, the Church calls on all, especially the poor, the oppressed and the afflicted, to cooperate with God to bring about liberation from every sin and to build a world which will reach the fullness of creation only when it becomes the work of people for people.<sup>27</sup>

#### IV. Preferential Option for the Poor

The moral test of a society is how it treats its most vulnerable members. The poor have the most urgent moral claim on the conscience of the nation. “The way society responds to the needs of the poor through its public policies is the litmus test of its justice or injustice.”<sup>28</sup> We are called to look at public policy decisions in terms of how they affect the poor. The “option for the poor,” is not an adversarial slogan that pits one group or class against another. Rather it states that the deprivation and powerlessness of the poor wounds the whole community. Pope John Paul II says,

A consistent theme of Catholic social teaching is the option or love of preference for the poor. Today, this preference has to be expressed in worldwide dimensions, embracing the immense numbers of the hungry, the needy, the homeless, those without medical care, and those without hope.<sup>29</sup>

The option for the poor is an essential part of society’s effort to achieve the common good. A healthy community can be achieved only if its members give special attention to those with special needs, to those who are poor and on the margins of society. “The Church of the Poor,” Labayen says, “bears witness to the fact that, like God the Church is for all peoples, to be at their service for the sake of life, with a special preference for ‘those who are poor or in any way afflicted among them’.”<sup>30</sup>

Moreover, this concern is a universal undertaking. It is not simply an institutionalized endeavor but both personal and communitarian. A pastoral letter repeats the importance of personal and collective concern for the poor,

As individuals and as a nation, therefore, we are called to make a fundamental ‘option for the poor.’ The obligation to evaluate social and economic activity from the viewpoint of the poor and the powerless arises from the radical command to love one’s neighbor as one’s self. Those who are marginalized and whose rights are denied have privileged claims if society is to provide justice for all. This obligation is deeply rooted in Christian belief.<sup>31</sup>

This preferential option for the poor can already be seen in the history of the Church. It is a continuous inner struggle of the Church to fight for them. In fact, it can be said that “the history of the Church can be written as a history of love and charity towards the poorest of the poor.”<sup>32</sup> In any event, it is clear, and all agree that the poor must be speedily and fittingly cared for, since the great majority of them live undeservedly in miserable and wretched conditions.”<sup>33</sup> This reality could be given bases from the Old Testament. Yahweh cares for the poor, especially the orphans and widows. This concern of Yahweh became part of Jesus mission. “His entire life was a testimony of this love of preference for the poor.”<sup>34</sup> He dedicated his whole life for all and for the poor. This is the same call that Jesus invites everyone to, a dedication of ones life for others.

It is also a demand of Christ for his people to follow his own love of preference for the poor. This option takes on the greatest urgency in our country where a very great number of our people wallow in abject poverty and

misery while tremendous social privileges and deference are accorded the rich and the powerful.<sup>35</sup>

To opt for the poor is a consequence of one's following the footsteps of Christ even to the most difficult of times. This same mission and call had been specifically addressed by the Holy Father in his encyclical letter. Knowing the condition of the people of Asia, he invites "the Church in Asia then, with its multitude of poor and oppressed people, is called to live a communion of life which shows itself particularly in loving service to the poor and defenseless."<sup>36</sup> It is a noble mission of Asian Christians to propagate the same concern for the poor and needy. In fact, "in seeking," he continues, "to promote human dignity, the Church shows a preferential love for the poor and the voiceless, because the Lord has identified himself with them in a special way."<sup>37</sup>

## V. Conclusion

The **Catholic Social Teachings** on the "Church of the poor" is a reminder for all that the mission to proclaim the Gospel is still very much relevant. At this period in our history as a nation, the preferential option for the poor is a very significant issue to consider. It is specifically and strongly addressed to the Church of the Philippines. The Church of the Philippines through her leaders should advocate the same preferential option for the poor. The President of the Catholic Bishop's Conference of the Philippines (CBCP) urges the people of God to be concerned for all but especially the rural and urban poor. He states that "the greater numbers of our poor are in the rural areas. The poor abound in our cities too, and we must be concerned for them as for our rural poor."<sup>38</sup> This is a great challenge for everyone. It is a challenge of hope, faith, and love.

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## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> Pope Paul VI, *Populorum Progressio*, (Pasay City: Daughters of Saint Paul, 1995), 2; Moreover, in many ways the point of departure was the Encyclical Letter *Rerum Novarum* of Pope Leo XIII (15 May 1891) which ushered in a series of solemn Church statements on various aspects of the social question. Among these was the Encyclical Letter *Populorum Progressio* (26 March 1967) which Pope Paul VI issued in response to the teachings of the Second Vatican Council and a changed world situation. To commemorate the twentieth anniversary of that Encyclical, Pope John Paul II released the Encyclical Letter *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis* (3 December 1987) in which, following the earlier Magisterium, he invited all the faithful to see themselves as called to a mission of service which necessarily includes the promotion of integral human development.

<sup>2</sup> Gustavo Gutierrez, *Born of the Poor*, edited by L. Cleary, (London: University of Notre Dame Press, 1990), 13 [Italics added].

<sup>3</sup> Bishop Julio X. Labayen, *Revolution and the Church of the Poor*, (Manila: Socio-Pastoral Institute and Claretian Publication, 1995), 2 [Emphasis is Labayen's].

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<sup>4</sup> Pope John Paul II, *Laborem Exercens*, 37, [Encyclical on-line]; September 14, 1981; available from [http://www.osjspm.org/majordoc\\_laborem\\_exercens](http://www.osjspm.org/majordoc_laborem_exercens); 27 September 2007.

<sup>5</sup> The Church's social teaching is a rich treasure of wisdom about building a just society and living lives of holiness amidst the challenges of modern society. Modern Catholic social teaching has been articulated through a tradition of papal, conciliar, and episcopal documents. The depth and richness of this tradition can be understood best through a direct reading of these documents. Thus, it includes the documents of Vatican II, and *PCP II*.

<sup>6</sup> "To be a 'Church of the poor'--a church that stands with the people and is in solidarity with the poor, that seeks justice that is communal. This was not meant to create a parallel church (a church of the poor, a church of the middle class, and a church of the rich), but rather an attempt to reform the whole institution, so that the least among us and their concerns would have an adequate place and a hearing within the church. To speak of the church of the poor then is to speak of a church where all, including the poor, are welcome as Christ. The preferential option for the poor was born in the late sixties and flourished in the seventies. Like any reform proposal, it was not accepted by everyone, but it was a key element in the pastoral understanding of the Latin American bishops in Medellin (1968), Puebla (1979), and Santo Domingo (1992), and it was made concrete in pastoral work in many parts of the continent. God is a God of justice: in the Bible, God acted on behalf of the poor and through the poor. The church, in turn, must be in solidarity with the poor, the oppressed, and the suffering." Robert Hurteau, "What is the church of the poor? A missionary reshapes his theology," [Article on-line]; March 26, 1993; available from [http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi\\_m1252/is\\_n6\\_v120/ai\\_13607584](http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_m1252/is_n6_v120/ai_13607584). 23 September 2007.

<sup>7</sup> Labayen, *Revolution and the Church*, 28.

<sup>8</sup> Pope John XXIII, "Inaugural Speech during the Opening of the Second Vatican Council," quoted in *Revolution and the Church of the Poor*, Labayen, 32.

<sup>9</sup> Labayen, *Revolution and the Church*, 10.

<sup>10</sup> 2 Corinthians 8:9-10.

<sup>11</sup> Vatican II, *The Conciliar and Post and Post Conciliar Documents, Lumen Gentium*, 8, (New York: Costello Publishing Company, 1975).

<sup>12</sup> Pope Paul VI, *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, 75, [Article on-line]; December 08, 1975; available from [http://www.vatican.va/holy\\_father/paul\\_vi/apost\\_exhortations/documents/hf\\_pvi\\_exh\\_19751208\\_evangelii-nuntiandi\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/paul_vi/apost_exhortations/documents/hf_pvi_exh_19751208_evangelii-nuntiandi_en.html); 30 September 2007.

<sup>13</sup> *Gaudium et Spes*, 4.

<sup>14</sup> Donald Dorr, *Option for the Poor*, (Ireland: Gill and McMillan, 1992), 229.

<sup>15</sup> *Gaudium et Spes*, 3; Mt. 28: 16-20.

<sup>16</sup> Archbishop Paul Josef Cordes, *World Hunger, A Challenge for All: Development in Solidarity*, (Pasay City: Daughters of St. Paul, 1997), 26.

<sup>17</sup> Wilfredo Fabros, *The Church and its Social Involvement in the Philippines*, (Quezon City: Ateneo de Manila University Press, 1988), 2.

<sup>18</sup> Pope Leo XIII, *Rerum Novarum*, (Pasay City: Daughters of St. Paul, 1993), 36; Luke 11:41.

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<sup>19</sup> “Global Climate Change: A Plea for Dialogue, Prudence, and the Common Good,” [Article on-line]; available from <http://www.usccb.org/sdwp/projects/socialteaching/>; 29 September 2007.

<sup>20</sup> *Acts and Decrees of the Second Provincial Council of Manila*, (Manila: Roman Catholic Archbishop of Manila, 1997), 80.

<sup>21</sup> Lagarejos, Arnel. *The Church of the Poor: A New Perspective on the Church, the State and the Poor*, (Pasig: Educational Resources Development Center, 1998) 106.

<sup>22</sup> Pope John Paul II, *Centisimus Annus*, 11 [Encyclical on-line]; May 01, 1991; available from [http://www.osjspm.org/majordoc\\_centisimus\\_annus\\_official\\_text.aspx](http://www.osjspm.org/majordoc_centisimus_annus_official_text.aspx); 27 September 2007; Gen. 1:27.

<sup>23</sup> US Bishops, “The Challenge of Peace: God’s Promise and Our Response,” 15, [Article on-line]; 1983; available from [http://www.osjspm.org/the\\_challenge\\_of\\_peace\\_1.aspx](http://www.osjspm.org/the_challenge_of_peace_1.aspx); 29 September 2007.

<sup>24</sup> George Pixley and Clodovis Boff, *The Bible, the Church, and the Poor*, (New York: Orbis Books, 1993), 130; James 2:5.

<sup>25</sup> Pastoral Letter on Catholic Social Teaching and the U.S. Economy, “Economic Justice for All,” [Article on-line]; 1986; available from [http://www.osjspm.org/economic\\_justice\\_for\\_all.aspx](http://www.osjspm.org/economic_justice_for_all.aspx); 27 September 2007; *Acts and Decrees of the Second Plenary Council of the Philippines*, Philippines: Paulines Publishing House, 1992), 135; Julio Labayen, *To be the Church of the Poor*, (Manila: Socio-Pastoral Institute, 1995), 34. Here Labayen expresses that the “overriding reason for the option for the poor is because God is with them and his Christ has already opted.”

<sup>26</sup> Pope John Paul II, *Evangelium Vitae*, 19, [Encyclical on-line]; March 25, 1995; available from [http://www.osjspm.org/majordoc\\_evangelium\\_vitae\\_official\\_text.aspx](http://www.osjspm.org/majordoc_evangelium_vitae_official_text.aspx); 27 September 2007.

<sup>27</sup> World Synod of Catholic Bishops, *Iustitia Mundi*, 77 [Book on-line]; 1971; available from [http://www.osjspm.org/majordoc\\_justicia\\_in\\_mundo\\_offical\\_test.aspx](http://www.osjspm.org/majordoc_justicia_in_mundo_offical_test.aspx); 27 September 2007.

<sup>28</sup> Pastoral Letter, “Economic Justice for All,” 123, [Article on-line].

<sup>29</sup> Pope John Paull, *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis*, 42, [Encyclical on-line]; December 30, 1987; available from [http://www.osjspm.org/majordoc\\_soclicitudo\\_rei\\_socialis\\_official\\_text.aspx](http://www.osjspm.org/majordoc_soclicitudo_rei_socialis_official_text.aspx); 27 September 2007.

<sup>30</sup> Labayen, *Revolution and the Church*, 38; *Gaudium et Spes*, 1.

<sup>31</sup> Pastoral Letter, “Economic Justice for All,” [Article on-line]; 87.

<sup>32</sup> Paul Josef Cordes, *World Hunger, A Challenge for All: Development in Solidarity*, (Pasay City: Daughters of St. Paul, 1997), 7.

<sup>33</sup> Pope Leo XIII, *Rerum Novarum*, 5.

<sup>34</sup> *PCP II*, 48; 2 Corinthians 8:9.

<sup>35</sup> *PCP II*, 312.

<sup>36</sup> Pope John Paul II, *Ecclesia in Asia*, (Pasay City: Paulines Publishing House, 1999), 32.

<sup>37</sup> John Paul II, *Ecclesia in Asia*, 34; Matthew 25:40; Jon Sobrino, *The True Church and the Poor*, (London: SCM Press, 1985), 97.

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<sup>38</sup> Archbishop Angel Lagdameo, "The Dignity of the Rural Poor: A Gospel Concern," (Rogate Ergo Asia, The Catholic Magazine for Vocations, Vol. 7, No. 4, January-March 2007), 3.

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