

07. A preferential option for the poor



Caravaggio 'The pilgrims'

The subject of this reflection is the call of the Gospel for us to make what has come to be called 'a preferential option for the poor'. As in the previous reflection, we will offer our reflections in the light of Pope Francis's critique of the way the choices we are making impact negatively, especially on the poor.

Laudato Si' n. 13

‘I want to recognize, encourage and thank all those striving in countless ways to guarantee the protection of the home which we share. Particular appreciation is owed to those who tirelessly seek to resolve the tragic effects of environmental degradation on the lives of the world’s poorest.’

‘There has been a tragic rise in the number of migrants seeking to flee from the growing poverty caused by environmental degradation. They are not recognised by international conventions as refugees; they bear the loss of the lives they have left behind, without enjoying any legal protection whatsoever.

Sadly, there is widespread indifference to such suffering, which is even now taking place throughout our world. Our lack of response to these tragedies involving our brothers and sisters points to the loss of that sense of responsibility for our fellow men and women upon which all civil society is founded.’

n. 45

‘Frequently, we find beautiful and carefully manicured green spaces in so-called “safer” areas of cities, but not in the more hidden areas where the disposable of society live.’

n. 48

‘The deterioration of the environment and of society affects the most vulnerable people on the planet. Both everyday experience and scientific research show that the gravest effects of all attacks on the environment are suffered by the poorest.’

‘It needs to be said that, generally speaking, there is little in the way of clear awareness of problems which especially affect the excluded. Yet they are the majority of the planet’s population, billions of people. These days, they are mentioned in international political and economic discussions, but one often has the impression that their problems are brought up as an afterthought, a question which gets added almost out of duty or in a tangential way, if not treated merely as collateral damage.

n. 49 (continued)

Indeed, when all is said and done, they frequently remain at the bottom of the pile. This is due partly to the fact that many professionals, opinion makers, communications media and centres of power, being located in affluent urban areas, are far removed from the poor, with little direct contact with their problems. They live and reason from the comfortable position of a high level of development and a quality of life well beyond the reach of the majority of the world's population.

n. 49 (continued)

‘This lack of physical contact and encounter, encouraged at times by the disintegration of our cities, can lead to a numbing of conscience and to analyses that push a point of view and neglect parts of reality. At times this attitude exists side by side with a “green” rhetoric. Today, however, we have to realise that a true ecological approach *always* becomes a social approach; it must integrate questions of justice in debates on the environment, so as to hear *both the cry of the earth and the cry of the poor.*’

‘Inequality affects not only individuals, but entire countries; it compels us to consider the ethics of international relations. A true “ecological debt” exists, particularly between the global north and south, connected to commercial imbalances with effects on the environment and the disproportionate use of natural resources by certain countries over long periods of time. The export of raw materials to satisfy markets in the industrialised north has caused harm locally, as for example in mercury pollution in gold mining or sulphur dioxide pollution in copper mining.

n. 51 continued

There is a pressing need to calculate the use of environmental space throughout the world for depositing gas residues which have been accumulating for two centuries and have created a situation which currently affects all the countries of the world. The warming caused by huge consumption on the part of some rich countries has repercussions on the poorest areas of the world, especially Africa, where a rise in temperature, together with drought, has proved devastating for farming.

n. 51 continued

There is also the damage caused by the export of solid waste and toxic liquids to developing countries, and by the pollution produced by companies which operate in less developed countries in ways they could never do at home, in the countries in which they raise their capital.’.

n. 51 continued

We note that often the businesses which operate this way are multinationals. They do here what they would never do in developed countries or the so-called first world. Generally, after ceasing their activity and withdrawing, they leave behind great human and environmental liabilities such as unemployment, abandoned towns, the depletion of natural reserves, deforestation, the impoverishment of agriculture and local stock breeding, open pits, riven hills, polluted rivers and a handful of social works which are no longer sustainable

‘The foreign debt of poor countries has become a way of controlling them, yet this is not the case where ecological debt is concerned. In different ways, developing countries, where the most important reserves of the biosphere are found, continue to fuel the development of richer countries at the cost of their own present and future. The land of the southern poor is rich and mostly unpolluted, yet access to ownership of goods and resources for meeting vital needs is inhibited by a system of commercial relations and ownership which is structurally perverse.

n. 52 continued

The developed countries ought to help pay this debt by significantly limiting their consumption of non-renewable energy and by assisting poorer countries to support policies and programmes of sustainable development. The poorest areas and countries are less capable of adopting new models for reducing environmental impact because they lack the wherewithal to develop the necessary processes and to cover their costs’.

Pope Francis quotes Leviticus 19:9-10

“When you reap the harvest of your land, you shall not reap your field to its very border, neither shall you gather the gleanings after the harvest. And you shall not strip your vineyard bare, neither shall you gather the fallen grapes of your vineyard; you shall leave them for the poor and for the sojourner”(n.71).

Laudato Si' n. 90

‘We fail to see that some are mired in desperate and degrading poverty, with no way out, while others have not the faintest idea of what to do with their possessions, vainly showing off their supposed superiority and leaving behind them so much waste which, if it were the case everywhere, would destroy the planet. In practice, we continue to tolerate that some consider themselves more human than others, as if they had been born with greater rights.’

n. 117

‘When we fail to acknowledge as part of reality the worth of a poor person, a human embryo, a person with disabilities – to offer just a few examples – it becomes difficult to hear the cry of nature itself; everything is connected.’

‘In the present condition of global society, where injustices abound and growing numbers of people are deprived of basic human rights and considered expendable, the principle of the common good immediately becomes, logically and inevitably, a summons to solidarity and a preferential option for the poorest of our brothers and sisters. This option entails recognising the implications of the universal destination of the world’s goods, but, as I mentioned in the Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium*, it demands before all else an appreciation of the immense dignity of the poor in the light of our deepest convictions as believers.’

n. 162

‘Our inability to think seriously about future generations is linked to our inability to broaden the scope of our present interests and to give consideration to those who remain excluded from development. Let us not only keep the poor of the future in mind, but also today’s poor, whose life on this earth is brief and who cannot keep on waiting.’

Pope Francis: The Joy of the Gospel

“God shows the poor his first mercy”(Evangelii Gaudium, 198)

“The Church has made an option for the poor which is understood as a ‘special form of primacy in the exercise of Christian charity, to which the whole tradition of the Church bears witness ...’ This is why I want a Church which is poor and for the poor. They have much to teach us ... We need to let ourselves be evangelised by them.” (Evangelii Gaudium, 198)

Jean Vanier

‘Indeed, far from being desirable, success and power and wealth prevent us from being truly ourselves. It is only when we recognise our weakness, our poverty, when we seek help, that we become human. We are not called to be perfect; we are called to be humble. And this is the gift we receive when we live with and work beside people who are fragile ... The poorest lead us into another world ...

‘There are a lot of people clapping Francis. But are they doing what he suggests? Are they going to the peripheries and befriending the poorest, and receiving the wisdom that the poor can give? The church will not change because of Francis. It will change because of all of us. Because of me.’ (See *The Tablet* 26 April 2014, pp. 10-11)

Pope Francis is calling each of us to DO something.
We can't hide behind corporate, global, responsibility.

Albert Nolan OP

(New Blackfriars 1986. Encounter Spring 1988, page 3)

‘The option for the poor is an uncompromising and unequivocal taking of sides in a situation of structural conflict. It is not a matter of preaching to some people rather than to others, or a matter of being generous to the ‘under-privileged’, or a judgment about the personal guilt of the rich, or even, in the first instance, a matter of life-style. It is the assertion that Christian faith entails, for everyone and as part of its essence, the taking of sides in the structural conflict between the oppressor and the oppressed.’

Albert Nolan OP

(New Blackfriars 1986. Encounter Spring 1988, page 9)

‘A thoroughgoing option for the poor includes the willingness to question one’s assumptions and to learn from those who are oppressed. It is only after one has learned to have confidence in the ability of the oppressed to promote their own cause and to bring about their own liberation that one can begin to share that struggle with them and to make a contribution in real solidarity with all those who have taken an option against oppression.’

Abbé Pierre : The Poor

‘Let us never lose our living conviction that it is not necessary to wait until we are splendid people before we can do splendid things.

That would probably mean waiting a long time, too long in fact!

We need only to understand one splendid thing and then try to base our whole life upon it: and that thing is that the person we must help in all things is the person who is suffering the most.’

Abbé Pierre : Suffering

‘Suffering says to love: Do not leave me,
you who have called for me.

I know that without you I would turn back
and become, once again, something ugly.

Tell me that you will never leave me.

I am afraid to find myself alone.

Love replies: Do not be afraid.

Perhaps you fail to realise

that with you I become more beautiful,

though people find this hard to imagine and believe.

Yes, my beloved Suffering, I love you

because you complete my beauty

and because you alone know how to bring love to perfection, full
of light and joy.’

Pope John-Paul II 1987

‘One of the characteristic themes and guidelines dealt with by the Magisterium in recent years is the option or love of preference for the poor. 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 cannot but embrace the immense multitudes of the hungry, the needy, the homeless, those without medical care, and, above all, those without hope of a better future. It is impossible not to take account of the existence of these realities. To ignore them would mean becoming like the rich man who pretended not to know the beggar Lazarus lying at his gate’(JP II *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis* 1987 n. 42).

(McAfee Brown R. "Saying Yes and Saying No"
(Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1986) page 63.

“To speak of a preferential option for the poor is not to speak of an exclusive option for the poor, as though God loved only the poor and did not love anybody else, especially the rich. What is asserted is that in responding to the concern that God has for all people, we start toward the fulfilment of that long-range concern by an immediate and initial concern for the poor, working with them and for them. To the degree that the cries of the poor are given priority over the complaints of the rich, there can be movement towards a society that is more, rather than less, just.”

Gregory the Great: Pastoral Rule 3.21

‘When we attend to the needs of those in want, we give them what is theirs, not ours. More than performing works of mercy, we are paying a debt of justice.’

JPII Centesimus Annus 1991 n. 57

‘The preferential option for the poor is not limited to material poverty, since it is well known that there are many other forms of poverty, especially in modern society – not only economic but cultural and spiritual poverty as well.’

JPII Centesimus Annus 1991 n. 58

‘Promoting justice is a matter of helping entire peoples which are at present excluded or marginalised to enter into the sphere of economic and human development. For this to happen, it is not enough to draw on the surplus goods which in fact our world abundantly produces; it requires above all a change of lifestyles, of models of production and consumption, and of the establishes structures of power, which today govern societies.’

(JPII Laborem Exercens 1981 n. 8

‘New movements of solidarity of the workers and with the workers must be present whenever it is called for by the social degrading of the subjects of work, by exploitation of the workers, and by growing areas of poverty and even hunger. The Church is firmly committed to the cause of the “poor”, for it considers it to be its mission, its service, a proof of its fidelity to Christ, so that it can truly be the “Church of the poor.”

There are many indices of poverty. Some people are “poor” from only one point of view, while others are “poor” from many points of view. However, the greatest poverty is to be deprived of love, and not to recognise this is to run the risk of distorting the gospel and also of undervaluing what people are already doing in the cause of justice, and so of adding to the oppression that saps people’s energy. The implications of this are that a preferential option for the poor can take place in any genuine human interaction anywhere. It is a matter of one’s entry point into that interaction and the dynamic that takes place there, and of the direction which the energy of the interaction takes.