

(New Blackfriars 1986. Encounter Spring 1988, pages 3 and 9)

‘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.’

‘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.’

‘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.’

(Luke 16:19-31)’(JP II *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis* 1987 n. 42).

‘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.” ’

(JPII Laborem Exercens 1981 n. 8)

‘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. 57).

‘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’(n. 58)

Pope Francis

“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 evangelized 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)

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.