The Preferential Option for the Poor

The call to stand with, speak with, speak for, the poor is the cornerstone of the Christian faith

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Religious life, by definition, is meant to be prophetic. Negatively stated, this means that a woman or a man does not become a Christian simply to be a part of a committee, however needed and valuable that might be.

Unfortunately, clergy have often fallen into the idea of understanding their vocations as simply being a question of service to the ministry of the church as defined by the needs of the church — word, sacrament, service, order. In fact, clergy have often prided themselves on the loyalty of their service to the bishops and the fact that they have never “rocked the boat” on anything. While much of this is admirable and speaks of prayer, dedication, and fidelity, part of it might also suggest, especially in a time when the poor are becoming poorer, an abdication of the prophetic dimension of religious life.

Religious life is not a question of simply being at the service of the church. Rather, inherent in the very nature of being a Christian is the call to be prophetic in ways that the structured church cannot be. This is not to say that the structured church is not itself prophetic. It is, but its nature demands an inclusivity that does not call it to stand on the edges in the same way as an individual or group of individuals might. Christian life has to do with standing at the margins. It is meant to be prophetic, irrespective of whether the articulated charism of the founder explicitly mentions standing on the margins or not.

Moreover, a key component within this prophetic dimension is the call to stand with the poor, to speak with them, to speak for them, to remind the world where the cross of Christ is placed, and to remind everyone that the one who is rejected, the insignificant one, the neglected one, the totally powerless one, is the cornerstone on which the whole house depends. To be a prophet is to continually remind the world that what it has marginalized is spiritually at the center.

The Widening Gap Between Rich and Poor

In the history of humanity, there has always been a gap between rich and poor, between those who have power and those who do not. Has anything changed within the past generation?

The answer to that question must clearly be “yes.” While there has always been a gap between rich and poor, this gap has not always been exacerbated by the following factors:

1) Globalization, at least in its economic component, is widening the gap between rich and poor. National governments are no longer in control of their own economies and market forces (for the most part, blind, separate, amoral, and self-interested) are in control. This has made for a radically unfair situation since different persons and different nations are all asked to play the same game: Some arrive at the table having been dealt two decks of cards by history, while others arrive at the same table with no aces in their deck. It’s an unfair game, even though the rules seem the same for everyone.

The net result is that the rich are getting richer and the poor are getting still less. Those who have been less economically-advantaged in history are often finding themselves and their resources, in effect, being strip-mined for the benefit of others. We live in a world that is, daily, becoming less and less fair in terms of economic justice.

2) More awareness by the poor of their plight and the injustice of the economic system. More than ever, the poor know that they are poor. The see, on television, in the movies, through advertising, and in countless other ways, what the rich have. This, for better or worse, has radically changed their mentality because it has, in a very raw way, stimulated both their legitimate hungers and their own greed. In effect, today, the poor know what they are missing out on. For better or worse, they want out of poverty.

This has triggered three things: It has helped to set loose a sea of restlessness, anger, and potential for violence; it has helped trigger the quest for justice within many groups and individuals; and it has helped trigger a violent, repressive fundamentalism among some groups and individuals who are set to defeat the forces of globalization by violence and apartheid.

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3) The poverty of technological illiteracy. The widening gap between the rich and poor is not just in terms of money. Money is only one means of power; access to and use of technology is another. Today the gap between rich and poor is also widening vis-a-vis technological literacy, and the poor are being left even further behind.

4) A new moral ease about being rich and a developing arrogance among the powerful. Today, in the world, no one need apologize about being rich, about having much more than is needed for life and comfort. Wealth and the very greed that pushes toward it are generally celebrated as virtues. Celebrity, wealth and status have become the new virtues by which we define sanctity, and the lives of the rich and famous have replaced the lives of the "saints" as the models for our lives. Hence, there is now a new moral ease about being wealthy and powerful, and this unhealthy ease has brought with it a new arrogance. The strong, powerful, rich, and healthy can now look at the poor, the unhealthy, the unattractive, the sick, the helpless, the aged, the handicapped, the unborn, and all of those who do not have power, and impune to them the responsibility for their own plight. The algebra of the new logic is: Since my wealth is earned, so too is your poverty.

Ten Commandments for the Long Haul

A contemporary saying makes the following suggestion: "Not everything can be fixed or cured, but it should be named properly." What follows is more in the line of naming some key directions within which to travel than of outlining any detailed program for practical projects.

What should Christians be doing today in terms of making a preferential option for the poor?

1) The preferential option for the poor is an essential, non-negotiable component of religious life, irrespective of whether our own particular founders spoke of it or not.

2) The preferential option for the poor must not be lived out simplistically, i.e. as a vow of alienation where we deliver an unqualified slap to the face of mainstream culture. God still loves the world and still blesses it. So must we all. There is much that is good in our world and our secular cultures that must be affirmed. We must comfort our world even as we challenge it. At the same time, we must constantly challenge the world to see where the cross of Christ stands, namely, to see who is being excluded, who is suffering, who is powerless, who is victim, and who is dying.

In essence, our task is to walk a delicate tightrope between two things: A "vow" of alienation, within which we can never love, affirm, bless and comfort the culture, and a life of compromise, within which we in fact do not challenge the world in our words and especially in our own lifestyle.

3) We need to, with more courage than we have summoned to date, look at our actual lifestyles as they relate to poverty, simplicity, and solidarity with the poor. Much of our potential challenge to the world is effectively undercut by our actual lives. Everyone is writing about concern for the poor; we have no shortage of prophetic words, only a shortage of prophetic acts. There is no shortage of rhetoric in favor of the poor, but very few persons have actually taken the plunge into a more simple lifestyle.

4) In seeking candidates for ordained ministry, we must make the preferential option for the poor both the centerpiece of our appeal as well as the criterion for acceptance. We need to seek and accept only candidates who are capable both of understanding and living the inherent option for the poor.

5) In the formation of our candidates, we must make the preferential option for the poor an integral part of the formation (seminary) program.

6) We must take more practical risks, as Christians, congregations, and denominations, in putting our financial portfolios more at the service of the poor. This does not mean that we give our money away or that we do not have investments (which are needed to sustain our ministries and our aged members). The vision is rather of Christians, congregations, denominations pooling their portfolios and using them as investment banks to help the poor. We would still make money, but less of it, but our monies would be more directly in the service of the poor. Until religious communities and churches risk this, we are still not really serious about making a preferential option for the poor.

7) We must link our preferential option for the poor more directly to lives of prayer and piety. We live in a world within which, for the most part, the liberals aren't pious and the pious aren't liberal.... and most of our witness, from either side, is effectively undercut because of that. Much of our witness for the poor is ineffective, and indeed not prophetic at all, because it issues forth not from faith and love, but from ideology and political agenda, just as very often our prayer is seen as escapist piety because it is not linked to a real commitment to the poor.

8) We must make sure that our option for the poor and the energy we use in trying to be prophetic does not issue from our own bitterness, personal failure, or ego and the need for power. Too often our actions for peace and justice are structurally indistinguishable from the greed, ego, lust for power and violence we are trying to oppose. Bitterness and grandiosity are great fuels, but they are not gospel fuels. Not only must our cause for prophecy be correct, the energy that fuels it must also be correct.

9) In making the preferential option for the poor, hope must always be the key sustaining virtue. Hope lives in gospel-patience in the face of what is not, but what might be, by focusing on two things: God's promise, and the resurrection of Christ, which lets us know that God has power to reverse things. Hope relies more on lighting candles than on carrying guns, and it lives in an advert that believes that every tear brings the messiah closer.

10) Underneath all this, we need a sense of humor. The road is long, there will be opposition, we will countless times betray our own ideals, and perfect love and justice will always remain partly only a hope. But we must, daily, do the next right thing and remain always loving persons, persons of graciousness and charity who do not see life as a cosmic-tragedy. Despite cause and urgency, we must refuse the temptation to bracket the most basic of all virtues—personal charity—and the sense of humor that helps sustain it.