

## What Does It Mean by “the Poor”?

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“Option for the poor” appeared in Donal Dorr’s book by the same name in 1983 and in its revised and expanded edition of 1992. At the time, “option for the poor” was a new concept. By now, it has become “one of the most hotly debated theological issues”<sup>①</sup> since “salvation through faith alone” of the Reformation era.

According to Dorr, we live in a society which is segregated, and many structures of economy, politics, culture and religion maintain the governing of the broad masses. These structures are mainly operated by organizations of the middle class, no matter what kind of personal virtue or value system they adhere to, by their work they will always increase the injustice within social structures. From this vantage point, “injustice” is practically a given, while “option for the poor” is “an answer to the injustice within the structures of society”.

However, if the structures of economy, politics, culture and religion are operated by specific institutions and associations and if personal virtues and value system cannot stop the injustice within social structures, who

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<sup>①</sup> Donal Dorr, *Option for the Poor: A Hundred Years of Vatican Social Teaching*, revised and expanded edition, New York: Orbis Books, 1992, p. 1.

then should determine “option for the poor”? This is my first point.

Secondly, “rich” and “poor” are relative terms. We have heard of the adage “wealth does not carry beyond three generations”, wealth and success are temporary, they can shift from east to west, and from west to east. If “the poor” were to successfully overcome oppression, choose their own destiny, and liberate themselves by removing unjust social structures and establishing new infrastructures to become “the rich”, would they in time degenerate unjust social structures, which would necessitate new options all over again?

Thirdly, theologians generally agree that the concept of “option for the poor” grew out of liberation theology and Marxism. But its roots are to be found in the Christian faith and its social doctrine. Theologians also realize that the doctrine of the Church will not be altered essentially, but at least there can be a shift of emphasis, because it is surely not a prearranged fix model or an eternally unchangeable truth. Rather, it is “an organic tradition” which has room for development. Related to this is the fact that faith is less concerned with the effectiveness of the principle of social administration. Its primary concern is to “provide guidance and witness for some basic human truths and values”.<sup>①</sup>

Fourthly, according to biblical text and history, Jesus was angered by “all who were buying and selling” in the temple (Matthew 21:12), and taught that one should “give to the poor” (Matthew 19:21) for it would be “easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God” (Matthew 19:24). However, from

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① Donal Dorr, *Option for the Poor: A Hundred Years of Vatican Social Teaching*, revised and expanded edition, New York: Orbis Books, 1992, p. 1.

God's rich rewards to Job (Job 42:8 ~ 15) to Max Weber's *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, “the poor” does not appear to be the ultimate basis of “election”.

Therefore, the premise of “option for the poor” should begin with defining “what does it mean by the poor”?

There are many important documents in Christian church history related to “the poor”, especially the numerous papal edicts issued in the Catholic Church. For example, Pope Leo XIII issued the *Rerum Novarum* in 1891 to discuss the condition of the working class. It pointed out that the heart of society's malaise lay in the fact that “the most part of the workers class live in pain and suffering”, “we cannot simply see labour as a kind of ware, since this is a denial of human dignity”, “the working class accepts a wage which is just above existence level because it has no other choice or is afraid of even worse consequences, but in this way the workers become victims of suppression and injustice” With Marx's *Das Kapital* published between 1867 ~ 1894, it is conceivable that “even if this encyclical vigorously denies socialism, ... it is colored by the principle of socialism itself.”<sup>①</sup>

Forty years after the *Rerum Novarum*, Pope Pius XI responded by issuing the *Quadragesimo Anno* in 1931 on the recovery of social order. Despite its assertion that Catholicism was “opposed to socialism”, the edict was an exercise in self-examination by the church. For instance, it mentioned that at times, the church “seems to stand on the side of the rich and is often criticized for only speaking for the wealthy, while

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① Donal Dorr, *Option for the Poor: A Hundred Years of Vatican Social Teaching*, revised and expanded edition, p. 9.

neglecting the needs of the proletariat in an aloof manner”. Such criticism might not be fair, but Pope Pius XI admitted that “quite many people... proclaim to believe in the truth of the Catholic faith, but on the other hand they almost totally neglect the noble rules of justice and love..., and there are even some people who are impelled by greed and exploit workers without feeling shame. ... some others even use the name of religion itself to cover up their unjust behavior.

In the 1961 *Mater et Magistra*, which discussed new developments in social issues, Pope John XXIII stressed that the church's continued “outcry and protest” against the growth of materialism in society, and her nostalgic memory of the frugal life of the past “is not only meaningless but even wrong.” Meanwhile, “the beacon of economic success is not only the amassing of resources and money, but also must pay attention to the just distribution of wealth”.

In the 1960s, Vatican II discussed the Church in the modern world. *Gaudium et Spes* reiterated the “option for the poor” principle: “all people have the right to possess property for themselves and their family ..., and those in extreme poverty have the right to use other people's goods in order to satisfy the basic needs to survive.”

In 1971, the second worldwide General Synod of Bishops published *Justice in the World*. In 1986, the American Synod of Bishops in turn published *Economic Justice for All*. In 2004, the Vatican published the revised edition of *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church*.<sup>①</sup>

All these documents are based on the biblical description of “the

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① Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church*, Vatican: Liberia Editrice Vaticanana, 2004.

poor”. For example, the Bible spoke of the disenfranchised and powerless in society—orphans, widows, and Gentiles. Jesus himself was portrayed as a commoner from the countryside, “the carpenter’s son” (Matthew 13 :54 ~ 16). But is the definition of “the poor” merely confined to these descriptions? Subsequent discussions on the topic can be summarized into the following challenges.<sup>①</sup>

First, no matter how you present it, “option for the poor” involves a “preferential love”, which may not agree with the Bible’s notion of “universal love”. If “universal love” had a “singular rather than “pluralistic” connotation, then it would give priority to one group of people over another.

Secondly, “option for the poor” is ultimately a subject of identity, confirming the identity of the subject, which allows for limitless interpretations. So if one absolutizes the perspective of “the poor”, this too may be conferring undue preference to a particular identity group or value stance.

Thirdly, “option for the poor” could easily lead to violence and cultural conflict as it attributes the plight of the poor to an unjust social system, and fails to fairly acknowledge the vigor, goodness and creativity present in other forces within society.

Following this line of reasoning, we have in Luke 6:20—“blessed are the poor”—the most notable biblical example of “the poor”. Matthew 5:3 is its synoptic equivalent. But Matthew 5:3 conveys the meaning of “the poor” as “the poor in spirit”, i. e. “the humble - hearted”. To

<sup>①</sup> Patricia Lamoureux, *The Criterion of Option for the Poor and Moral Discernment*, Louvain Studies, 21 (3), Fall 1996, pp. 261 ~ 287.

avoid misinterpretation, some later versions translate the verse as “those who know they are spiritually poor”.<sup>①</sup> Furthermore, this line of thinking suggests that the crux of the matter is not wealth, social status, or even spirituality. The actual “option” of “poverty” lies in our acknowledging and understanding our own finite nature, bringing us naturally to the concept of *kenosis*.

*Kenosis* appears in Philippians 2:7, which speaks of Jesus Christ’s divinity, incarnation and self – emptying. For although he is “in very nature God, (he) did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself and became obedient to death”.<sup>②</sup>

Some biblical scholars believe that *kenosis* meant Jesus emptied himself of all but love, which included utter self – denial. This is the *kenosis* theory of the metaphysical relinquishment of divine attributes. Be it “relinquishing” or self – emptying, Jesus’ original divinity is not compromised.<sup>③</sup>

If God’s *kenosis* is expressed as the relinquishment of divine attributes, then man’s *kenosis* should be expressed in “relinquishment of self – insistence” (*pozhi*, “破执”). This echoes the notion of “being absent in place”, the very theme of the editor’s foreword in our 14th issue. Without self – relinquishment, we are all susceptible to bias due to

① The Bible, Contemporary English Version.

② The Bible, New International Version, Philippians 2:6 – 8.

③ F. F. Bruce edited, *New International Bible Commentary*, revised edition, Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1979, p. 1444 ~ 1445.

our particular cultural identity, value system, religious conviction and language tradition, etc. We feel we must insist upon our subjective role in order to enter into dialogue, or even simply to be able to express ourselves. This could be the greatest misconception in modern western thought. Under this premise, we could never find common ground, and the description of any set of values or ideal, would always vary according to the vantage point of its presenter.

Therefore, the disintegration of value and meaning may not be the result of “doubt”, or the philosophy of “nothingness” or self - negation. Rather, it could well be the result of undue self - confidence and insistence upon a particular value system and basis of meaning. This theory applies not only to the language of the powerful, but also to that of the powerless. Based on this point of view, we cannot establish “the poor” merely by socio - economic status or other materialistic measurement.

Our discussion here is not just about biblical interpretation, or the teaching of the church, or Christian theology. Whenever we discuss “truth” or “justice”, we cannot avoid these same challenges. How then could we respond?

Post - colonial theorist, Gayatri Spivak, came out with her famous paper “Can the Subaltern Speak?” in the 1983. Her “subaltern” or “subalternity” is similar to “the poor” in Christian thought. The “subaltern” is “the poor” who are without the right of speech or a voice, and therefore unable to represent themselves even in the post - colonial era. Twenty - three years later, Spivak spoke at the United Nations Conference on Women held in Beijing, where she raised the same issue to

put the spotlight on “the subaltern”.

She quoted Karl Marx's *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*: “they cannot ensure the welfare of their class in their own name, or through a parliament or by custom”. Translated into English, this became the widely circulated adage: “They cannot represent themselves, they need others to represent them”<sup>①</sup>, quoted by Edward Said in the preface to his work *Orientalism*. In Spivak's writing, “the subaltern” or “the poor” that should have been rendered using “all the ideas of Marx” was emphatically depicted as the “rearranged wish”.<sup>②</sup> There, “rearranged wish” has two levels of meaning, distinctly different from each other.

On the one hand, the immolation of widows who setting themselves on fire for the sake of their dead husbands, or the suicide bombers, etc. are a forced compliance to an external tradition, order, authority or sacred text. They represent an involuntary “rearranged wish”, including a “collective rearranged wish”<sup>③</sup>.

On the other hand, Spivak believes that in Marx's “ingenious remarks the proletariat becomes a subject”, “making them aware that they are the subject of production”, and exactly this is the “rearrangement of

① Gayatri Spivak, “Critique and Answer” see *Foreign Literature*, published in Beijing, 2006, vol. 6, p. 72, p. 75

② Gayatri Spivak, “Critique and Answer”, see *Foreign Literature*, published in Beijing, 2006, vol. 6, p. 76, p. 74, p. 77

③ Gayatri Spivak, “Critique and Answer” see *Foreign Literature*, published in Beijing, 2006, vol. 6, p. 74, p. 77



proletariat's self identification"<sup>①</sup>. Moreover, Spivak believes that her work as a teacher is likewise "a rearrangement of people's wish in a non-compulsory way".<sup>②</sup>

The rearrangement of people's wish or identification and the "rearranged wish" inspire different understandings of subject identity, value ideals, concepts of justice, and truth speech, etc. Basically, whether it is Marx's "they cannot represent themselves, they need others to represent them", or Spivak's "rearrangement of people's wish in a non-compulsory way", they all communicate their respective "option for the poor". The manner with which the poor "is rearranged", whether it is "compulsory" or collective in nature, can be better elucidated through Jacques Derrida's "acts of religion": for the weak, the absent, or the silent community, even under the premise of "the option for the poor", the only appropriate act would be to "speak on behalf of them... without speaking for them."<sup>③</sup>

The logic behind "speaking for them" and "speaking for us" is the same, because the "identity" of the one who makes the choice is already a matter of preassurance. In other words, what is "preassured" confirms "subject identity", such that the only "option" is between "our value" or "their value", between "justice for the poor" or "justice for the rich". "Value" and "justice" perse still eludes us.

<sup>①</sup> Gayatri Spivak, "Critique and Answer", see *Foreign Literature*, published in Beijing, 2006, vol. 6, p. 76.

<sup>②</sup> Gayatri Spivak, "Critique and Answer", see *Foreign Literature*, published in Beijing, 2006, vol. 6, p. 73

<sup>③</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Acts of Religion*, edited by Derek Attridge, New York: Routledge, 1992, p. 45.

This, would be one response that the issue of “what is the poor” can offer to “option for the poor”. In the same manner, “the other” in theology may shed light on the humanities’ exploration of “the subject”.