

## Faithful Citizenship

### Principles and Strategies to Serve the Common Good

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## The Scandal of Poverty

### “Cultured Indifference” and the Option for the Poor Post-Katrina

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#### Introduction

[1] In September of 2004, a year before Hurricane Katrina struck the United States, a Category 5 hurricane battered the island of Cuba with 160-miles-per-hour winds. More than 1.5 million Cubans were evacuated to safe ground ahead of the storm. Though the storm destroyed 20,000 homes and caused widespread damage, *no one died*. Contrast this with the official count of 1,076 acknowledged dead due to Katrina, with many people yet unaccounted for. Other differences are striking. The head of Cuban civil defense stated in an interview: “Merely sticking people in a stadium is unthinkable. Shelters all have medical personnel . . . They have family doctors . . . who evacuate together with the neighborhood, and already know, for example, who needs insulin.” Furthermore, Cuba also evacuates animals and veterinarians, TV sets and refrigerators, “so that people aren’t reluctant to leave because people might steal their stuff” (Cohn).

[2] I do not relate this account to suggest that the U.S. should adopt Cuba's social and political policies. Rather, this experience reveals that a major storm need not result in the catastrophe and misery that we witnessed in New Orleans.

[3] Several years later, I am still haunted by tragic images: A dead body, propped in a wheelchair, covered with a blanket, abandoned outside of the New Orleans Super Dome. The elderly abandoned and left to die in nursing homes. Thousands left to languish in the tropical heat, stranded on an interstate overpass with no food, water, or transportation, refused permission to enter a suburban parish in search of relief. Tens of thousands left to wallow in unspeakable conditions in the public "shelter of last resort."

[4] Moreover, I am haunted by the fact that those who suffered most severely the impact of this natural catastrophe were the poor and the disabled, the black and the brown, the very young and the very old. It was impossible to ignore the obvious, though it took days to acknowledge it publicly: the images on our TV screens were disproportionately – even overwhelmingly – black, poor, elderly, destitute, and mentally impaired.

[5] Though nature may treat us all equally, Katrina demonstrated that society does not. The Cuban experience reveals that what unfolded in Katrina's aftermath did not have to happen. What happened occurred because of political decisions and social policies – human decisions which have ethical significance and which demand moral scrutiny.

[6] Katrina, then, was not just an act of nature. It also was a social phenomenon that exposed the harsh reality of race-based poverty that exists in the United States. Katrina revealed, as no other recent event, the tragic confluence of racism and poverty present in our nation – a poverty and racism exacerbated by decades of social callousness and public neglect (cf. Massingale 2007).

[7] And yet, as fast as the flood waters rose, the public's interest and the concern of our political leaders also receded. Sporadic news reports note the ongoing plight of those displaced by the storm and their efforts to obtain a modicum of safe shelter from those charged with the public good. But overall, the impression given is that all is "back to normal." Discussions of poverty and the plight of the impoverished have all but vanished in our nation's current public discourse.

[8] Such social indifference is a significant reality that must be raised up in any discussion of poverty. For indifference to the plight of the poor is not limited to those who are our fellow citizens. The statistics of global poverty are familiar to many: "One hundred thousand people die of hunger, or its immediate consequences, every day. A child aged under two dies every seven seconds, and every four minutes another goes blind for lack of Vitamin A" (Sobrino: 140). Others note that about 2.5 billion people in our world survive on less than \$2 dollars a day (Sobrino: 37). Poverty, then, is neither an incidental phenomenon nationally nor an isolated occurrence globally. It affects the great majority of the human community, yet is hidden from our awareness and all but absent in our public discussions.

[9] In this essay, then, I wish to lift up the indifference to the poor and give some account of the cultural dynamics that may account for it. Then I will examine the meaning of the "option for the poor" as it has developed in Catholic social reflection. I conclude with some

suggestions or observations of the implications of the option for the poor for Catholic action in a world of “post Katrina” poverty.<sup>1</sup>

### A “Cultured” Indifference to the Poor

[10] Webster’s dictionary defines indifference as “marked by a lack of interest, enthusiasm, or concern for something.” It notes that indifference also “suggests a lack of sensitivity or regard for other’s needs or troubles.” (The dictionary then provides a telling example, namely, being “indifferent to suffering and poverty.”) Indifference, then, is not mere neutrality, but apathy. Indifference, apathy, and a deficit of concern aggravate social divisions and tensions in our world. To a large degree, social chasms and their attending injustices exist between peoples because of a lack of care – indeed, a deficit of compassion.

[11] But a fuller ethical reflection requires that we move from description to analysis, from stating *what* is the case to probing *why* this state of affairs exists. This brings us to what I call a “cultured” indifference. If culture is “a set of meanings and values which informs a way of life” (Copeland: 52), then what are the meanings and values in our culture that account for our blindness and callousness toward the poor? How is it that many well-meaning and well-intentioned people come to be (perhaps) unwitting participants in a dynamic that destroys the lives of so many? What cultural dynamics foster our individual and collective indifference toward the poor?

[12] Obviously these are complex questions. Yet the effort to address them, even if only partially, must be made if we are to have a measure of clarity about who we are and why we are as we are. Though the following account is necessarily incomplete, my hope is that it stimulates reflection upon these important questions. I will focus upon three factors.

#### *The Influence of America’s Intellectual History on Poverty*

[13] The noted social historian, Michael Katz, has persuasively demonstrated that deeply embedded in the American intellectual tradition is a particular way of conceiving poverty. Americans tend to view poverty as a moral condition; that is, we believe that poverty is due to an individual’s deviant behavior. This understanding of poverty takes a unique twist in America, given the national myth that ours is the quintessential “land of opportunity” where success “await[s] anyone with energy and talent” (1989: 14). Poverty thus becomes equated with personal failure due to one’s laziness, irresponsibility, and lack of initiative. Poverty thus indicates not only economic need; it also suggests a moral defect in poor persons. Poverty, with few exceptions, is deemed to be one’s own fault (1995: 66-68).<sup>2</sup>

[14] The effects of this point of view, which Katz maintains is a constant feature in over two centuries of American history, are twofold. First, it leads to persistent – and futile – attempts

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<sup>1</sup> I hasten to add that I do not believe that the shape of poverty is significantly altered post Katrina. By “post Katrina,” I mean our struggle against poverty in a context of national indifference, an indifference sustained despite the obvious evidence that confronted us.

<sup>2</sup> This premise led to what Katz believes are two enduring features, found throughout American history in its discussions about poverty: “the division of the poor into categories of merit and the assumption that the roots of poverty lay in individual behavior” (Katz 1995: 66).

to distinguish between the “deserving” poor (who are in need through no personal fault and thus are worthy recipients of public assistance) and the “undeserving” poor (who are assumed to be the vast majority). Second, and most important for our discussion: Since Americans believe that poverty is a matter of personal responsibility, we presume that “its alleviation requires personal transformation, such as the acquisition of skills, commitment to the work ethic, or the practice of chastity” (1989: 7). Katz documents the long U.S. history of attempting to eradicate poverty through changing individual behavior or “improving poor people;” for example, “by frightening them with poorhouses, threatening to take away their children, training them in new skills, or regulating their sexuality” (1995: 4).

[15] Katz also notes that for over a century, Americans have been puzzled about why such an approach has not worked. For Katz (and I agree with his analysis), there is little wonder. Viewing poverty principally as a matter of personal irresponsibility shifts attention away from important, crucial, and uncomfortable questions such as: Is work really available for all who want it? What kinds of jobs are being created and for what kinds of jobs are the poor being trained? Is the minimum wage a “just wage,” or a “family wage” capable of supporting a household? What of those who work and are still poor? What of the corporate trend to relocate jobs to low wage regions, or using the threat of such relocation to force “concessions” in wages and benefits from employees – “concessions” which (temporarily) may save their jobs, yet leave them more economically vulnerable? Katz argues that a fixation upon a “personal responsibility” paradigm for explaining and combating poverty blinds us to such questions, and the “difficult and uncomfortable responses they require” (1995: 4). For such questions reveal the poverty which is rooted in structural causes (e.g., urban deindustrialization and the global mobility of capital) and demands systemic economic changes for its alleviation.

[16] The point I wish to emphasize is that to the extent that Americans have been influenced by our historic way of viewing poverty mainly in terms of “the shiftless, lazy, irresponsible poor” versus “the hardworking, responsible, and long-suffering rest of us,” to that extent we are also “cultured” in a stance of indifference and apathy toward the poor.

### *The Culture of Consumerism*

[17] In his social encyclicals, Pope John Paul II put forth a sustained critique of what he calls “the phenomenon of consumerism” (cf. John Paul II 1992a: no.28; and John Paul II 1992b: no. 36). According to this pontiff, a chief characteristic of a consumer society is that one’s “being” is defined by “having”: I have, therefore I am. In a consumer society, we are measured by what we possess, how much we possess, and our ability to possess. Our value, dignity, and worth are dependent upon what we have, how much we have, and our ability to get more.

[18] In a society where persons are defined by what they possess, how much they possess, and their ability to possess – by what they are “worth”– there is little or no room for the poor. Because what they possess is undesirable, and they don’t possess much, and can’t get more, the poor are literally and figuratively “worthless”– unwanted, unnecessary, and expendable. In a consumer society, the poor are, at best, irrelevant; at worst, they are a burden. In any case, they are a matter of indifference provided they are quiet, docile, and

non-disruptive. To the extent, then, that we are enthralled by our consumer society and its valuing of possessions, we also are “cultured” or conditioned toward a stance of indifference to the poor.

*The Persistence of Racism*

[19] A third factor that lends social support to a stance of indifference to the poor is the racism endemic in American life.

[20] One of the most riveting moments in the wake of Katrina occurred during a national telethon broadcast by NBC. During this telecast, the noted rap artist, Kanye West, departed from his prepared script and launched into an impassioned jeremiad against the conditions endured by the residents of New Orleans:

I hate the way they portray us in the media. If you see a black family, it says they're looting. See a white family, it says they're looking for food. And you know that it's been five days, because most of the people are black. And even for me to complain about it, I would be a hypocrite because I've tried to turn away from the T.V., because it's too hard to watch. We already realize a lot of people that could help are at war right now, fighting another way, and they have given them permission to go down and shoot us. [Mike Myers then reads a scripted comment. Kanye West interrupts, declaring,] George Bush doesn't care about black people (Democracy Now).

[20] Kanye West's outburst voiced the suspicions of many Black Americans that the public response to the plight of Katrina's survivors was shaped in no small degree by the fact that the overwhelming number of these victims were dark-skinned.

[21] This belief was highly contested, however, and evidenced a racial divide. The Pew Center for People and the Press reported that 77% of whites surveyed stated that race played no part in the government response to the hurricane.<sup>3</sup> The opposite conviction was widespread, though not universally held, in the Black community (66% of blacks surveyed). Jesse Jackson, for instance, when asked whether he believed the government's response was racially influenced, opined: “We have an amazing tolerance for black pain,” and “There's a historical indifference to the pain of poor people and black people” in this country (Simpson).

[22] To understand how racism is implicated in the Katrina event, and how racial beliefs shape public perception of and response to poverty, I turn to the idea of “unconscious racism” as this is developed by critical race legal scholars.

[23] In brief, “unconscious racism” connotes how race can operate as a negative – yet not conscious, deliberate, or intentional – decision-making factor, due to the pervasive cultural stigma attached to dark skin color in Western culture. To cite the seminal advocate of this school of thought, Charles R. Lawrence, “Traditional notions of intent do not reflect the fact that decisions about racial matters are influenced in large part by factors that can be

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<sup>3</sup> The Pew Center survey is reported in Brazile. News reports detailing the differing perceptions of blacks and whites on the role of race in the government's response to Katrina survivors can be found on MSNBC.

characterized as neither intentional – in the sense that certain outcomes are self-consciously sought – nor unintentional – in the sense that the outcomes are random, fortuitous, and uninfluenced by the decision maker’s beliefs, desires, and wishes” (322). Race functions as a largely unconscious or preconscious frame of perception, influenced by cultural conditioning and instilled through socialization.

[24] The key insight of this school of thought is conveyed in the following paragraph. Though lengthy, it merits citation and reflection:

Americans share a common historical and cultural heritage in which racism has played and still plays a dominant role. Because of this shared experience, we also inevitably share many ideas, attitudes, and beliefs that attach significance to an individual’s race and induce negative feelings and opinions about nonwhites. . . . At the same time, most of us are unaware of our racism. We do not recognize the ways in which our cultural experience has influenced our beliefs about race or the occasions on which those beliefs affect our actions. In other words, a large part of the behavior that produces racial discrimination is influenced by unconscious racial motivation (Lawrence: 322).

[25] Unconscious racism, then, denotes the influence of a cultural frame or lens that we have learned and act out of in unintentional and preconscious ways. It is shorthand for the concrete effects that result from a racial conditioning that is transmitted through what Lawrence calls “tacit understandings”:

. . . culture—including, for example, the media and an individual’s parents, peers, and authority figures—transmits certain beliefs and preferences. Because these beliefs are so much a part of the culture, they are not experienced as explicit lessons. Instead, they seem part of the individual’s rational ordering of her perceptions of the world. The individual is unaware, for example, that the ubiquitous presence of a cultural stereotype has influenced her perception that blacks are lazy or unintelligent [or more prone to violence]. Because racism is so deeply ingrained in our culture, it is likely to be transmitted by *tacit understandings*: Even if a child is not told that blacks are inferior, he learns that lesson by observing the behavior of others. These tacit understandings, because they have never been articulated, are less likely to be experienced at a conscious level (323).

[26] The tacit, covert, hidden character of this racial bias, motivation, and conditioning is critical to Lawrence’s understanding of unconscious racism’s insidious, pervasive, and largely unacknowledged impact:

*A crucial factor in the process that produces unconscious racism is the tacitly transmitted cultural stereotype. If an individual has never known a black doctor or lawyer or is exposed to blacks only through a mass media where they are portrayed in stereotyped roles of comedian, criminal, musician, or athlete, he is likely to deduce that blacks as a group are naturally inclined toward certain behavior and unfit for certain roles. But the lesson is not explicit: It is learned, internalized,*

*and used without an awareness of its source.* Thus an individual may select a white job applicant over an equally qualified black and honestly believe that this decision was based on observed intangibles unrelated to race. . . . Even the most thorough investigation of conscious motive will not uncover the race-based stereotype that has influenced his decision (Lawrence 343; emphasis added).

[27] Lawrence concludes that racism is a much more complex reality than is commonly recognized. He declares: “[R]acism in America is much more complex than either the conscious conspiracy of a power elite or the simple delusion of a few ignorant bigots. It is part of our common historical experience and, therefore, a part of our culture. It arises from assumptions we have learned to make about the world, ourselves, and others, as well as from the patterns of our fundamental social activities” (330).<sup>4</sup>

[28] There is yet another impact or effect of unconscious racism which needs to be noted, one that is directly related to a “cultured” indifference to the poor, which Lawrence calls “*racially selective sympathy and indifference.*” By this he means, “the unconscious failure to extend to a minority the same recognition of humanity, and hence the same sympathy and care, given as a matter of course to one’s own group” (n. 135). This indifference, rooted in unconscious racism, is important for understanding Jesse Jackson’s assertion that America has a high tolerance for black suffering. This concept also renders intelligible, though not excusable, the apparent indifference of New Orleans public officials who knew that many would not be able to leave the city, yet did not care enough to develop comprehensive plans for their evacuation. Again, note that this was not necessarily a conscious decision, but the unnoted effects of socialization in a culture of racism. Certain lives are thus easier to ignore, or put another way, certain lives have a higher claim upon public energy and concern. “Racially selective sympathy or indifference” was also evidenced in the disparate evacuations from hotels and certain hospitals while the black and poor languished.<sup>5</sup>

[29] Thus the events surrounding Katrina illumine both how and the extent to which racial bias is still a major force in U.S. life. But it is a type of racism which unacknowledged and

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<sup>4</sup> In another place, Lawrence notes: “. . . requiring proof of conscious or intentional motivation as a prerequisite to . . . [a] recognition that a decision is race-dependent ignores much of what we understand about how the human mind works. It also disregards the irrationality of racism and the profound effect that the history of American race relations has had on the individual and collective unconscious” (323). It should be noted that by “collective unconscious” Lawrence means “the collection of widely shared individual memories, beliefs, and understandings that exist in the mind at a nonreporting level. This nonreporting mental activity is widely shared because individuals who live within the same culture share common developmental experiences.” He is not using this term as it is understood in Jungian psychology (cf. n. 26).

<sup>5</sup> Decrying the “obvious and inexcusable disparity in responding to the needs of victims,” the president of the National Baptist Convention offered the following examples: “(1) Tulane University. Hospital personnel and patients were helicoptered out first; meanwhile Charity Hospital staff and patients waited and watched in full view. 2) A major hotel’s ‘guests’ were given escorted exodus from the area of disaster while others – city residents – could get no assistance. These hotel evacuees received antibiotics from adjacent stores to protect themselves from the health hazards of wading through polluted water. However, native citizens received no health care on the whole” (Statement of Dr. William J. Shaw, President, National Baptist Convention, USA, Regarding NBCUSA Responses and Reflections in the Wake of Hurricane Katrina, September 7, 2005).

easily denied, for it is largely unconscious or outside of personal awareness. Selective indifference and sympathy, rooted in tacit racial beliefs, underlies the social neglect of poor persons of color.

[30] Since in the popular mind, contrary to all empirical data, the color of the underclass is black or brown (Katz 1995: 69), “racially selective indifference” exacerbates the callousness and neglect that marks our public stances toward the poor. To the extent that we as individuals are influenced by the endemic racism of American life – however unwittingly or unconsciously – indifference to the poor is “cultured” and cultivated in us.

[31] It is my contention that these three factors – our American propensity toward seeing poverty almost solely in terms of personal responsibility, the consumerism of American society, and the persistence of racism – are among the chief cultural forces that work both to justify our nation’s neglect of the poor and legitimate the indifference to the poor found in otherwise well-intentioned individuals. We are “cultured” to be indifferent to and unconcerned about the plight of the poor in ways we are scarcely aware of.

[32] Paying attention to “cultured indifference” helps us to realize the profound challenge of being in solidarity with the poor. Concern for the poor entails swimming upstream against powerful cultural currents. The challenge is well-articulated in a haunting question posed by the Canadian theologian, Bernard Lonergan: “How is a mind to become conscious of its own bias when that bias springs from a communal flight from understanding and is supported by the whole texture of a civilization” (xiv)? Or in plainer words, how can we become aware of the poor when our society conspires to make us unaware?

[33] Having sketched the contours of our indifference to the poor, and the factors which foster this indifference, we turn now to the resources of our faith, seeking to understand the “option for the poor” and what that option might entail for us as scholars, believers, advocates, and citizens.

### **The Option for the Poor in Catholic Social Thought**

[34] The “option for poor” entered into the consciousness of Catholic theology and practice through the reflection of Latin American liberation theologians. The phrase was first adopted in the documents of the official church at the Third General Conference of Latin American Bishops at Puebla in 1979. Gustavo Gutiérrez is widely acknowledged as the author of the drafts of the Puebla statement that called upon the Church to adopt a “preferential option for the poor.” The concept and terminology subsequently have been embraced by the Church’s universal magisterium under the title of “the option or love of preference for the poor” (John Paul II 1992a: no. 42; Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith 1986: no. 68). Many consider this idea to be the most important contribution of liberation theology to the wider church.

[35] In brief, the “option for the poor” refers to a faith-inspired commitment on the part of Christians to identify themselves – either as individuals or institutions – with the plight of the neglected, despised and insignificant of society, and a consequent resolution to advocate on their behalf for a more just social order. It entails a decision to view social reality from the perspective of the victims of injustice.

[36] The literature on the option for the poor is voluminous; significant variations, nuances, and even disagreements exist as to how to understand the “preferential” aspect of this stance and who is included among “the poor” to whom one has a decisive commitment (cf. O’Brien, Pope, Nickoloff, O’Neill, Dorr, and Rieger). The meaning of this option continues to deepen with ongoing theological reflection and justice praxis. The following thesis statements express what appears to be the present “consensus understanding” in Catholic Social Thought.

[37] *The option for the poor is oriented to, and a consequence of, a commitment to the common good and the solidarity of the human community.* This is clearly evident in the teaching of John Paul II. He links the option for the poor with the concept of “solidarity,” which he defines as a “firm and persevering determination to commit oneself to the common good.” He declares that this stance of solidarity leads the Church “to take her stand beside the poor . . . in the context of the common good” (John Paul II 1992a: nos. 38-39). Theologians express this same insight when they justify a “preference” for the voiceless out of a concern for all segments of a society. Stephen Pope well articulates this when he states, “empowerment of the powerless is pursued so that all ‘parts’ are able to participate in the life of the whole community” (252). Thus the U.S. Bishops state that the option for the poor is neither adversarial nor exclusive; its goal is to have all persons share in and contribute to the common good and enjoy those conditions judged necessary for human flourishing and well-being (USCCB: no. 88).

[38] Hence the “option for the poor” is neither a partisan stance nor a political slogan. This phrase expresses a profound religious conviction about the inherent dignity and worth of all persons, including the socially despised, politically powerless, and economically destitute. Its inspiration is not adversarial, but inclusive, rooted in the conviction that all people are created in God’s image and count as human.

[39] *Concern for the common good and participatory justice demand a special concern for the poor and vulnerable.* The option for the poor requires a special recognition of the human dignity of the despised, neglected, and abandoned precisely because their humanity is the most vulnerable to compromise or question. Because the poor are most often subjected to social stigma, and have the least resources to redress their precarious social and cultural condition, if justice is to be a reality for all, then special attention must be given them. As the U.S. Bishops declare, “Those who are marginalized and whose rights are denied have privileged claims [upon the nation’s conscience] if society is to provide justice for *all*” (USCCB: no. 87; emphasis in the original).

[40] This special concern for the poor and the vulnerable is often expressed by adding the term “preferential” to the phrase “option for the poor.” As noted already, this addition is not meant to be a means of excluding any group from the scope of Christian concern. To speak of a “preferential” respect, love, or concern for the poor is a way of underscoring the inherent dignity, worth, and value of *all* peoples. For the conviction of Catholic Social Teaching is that if some can be denigrated as “worthless,” then the essential dignity of all is compromised and threatened. All potentially can be regarded as “worthless” if worth is dependent upon what one has or produces. In the words of the U.S. Bishops:

The prime purpose of this special commitment to the poor is . . . to enable *all* persons to share in and contribute to the life of society. The “option for the

poor” . . . states that the deprivation and powerlessness of the poor wounds the whole community (USCCB: no. 88; emphasis in the original).

[41] *The option for the poor is a faith commitment that stems from belief in the God of Jesus Christ.* The option for the poor is an expression of a core insight of Christian faith, namely, that Christ is truly present in the least of our sisters and brothers – so much so that the measure of our response to the poor is the measure of our response to Christ (cf. Matthew 25:31-46). Thus while “option for the poor” is a relatively new phrase in Catholic social thought, it is not simply a theological “fad.” The option for the poor is but the most current expression of what reverencing Christ in the guise of the poor demands in contemporary society, namely, the transformation of those social structures and conditions that are responsible for the poverty of the majority of the human family (Henriot: 18-19).

[42] Another way to express this insight is to say that the option for the poor has a *theocentric* motivation. The option for the poor is centered on God. The Christian’s concern about justice for the poor does not stem from one’s social analysis, political ideology, social class, or racial identity – as important as these factors may otherwise be. We are committed to the poor not because of our politics, but our faith. We are summoned to a proactive concern for the poor because of our love for God and God’s prior decisive concern for the least.

[43] Liberation theologians have helped the entire Church to rediscover the pervasive biblical testimony of God’s partiality for the victims of injustice. They maintain that God is a “God of life,” who both desires and acts on behalf of abundant life for all humankind (Gutiérrez 1991). Catholic Social Teaching expresses this insight when it speaks of the “universal destination of the goods of creation,” that is, the conviction that God intended creation to provide for the material needs of all (John Paul II 1992a). African American theologian Dwight Hopkins thus declares, “God prefers the poor because God opposes all forms of injustice which block the full humanity of the least in society” (127).

[44] Hence, the option for the poor is a faith response to the God who is revealed as having a constitutive option for justice (Vigil: 2004). Indeed, Juan Luis Segundo avows that the best way to convey the meaning of the option for the poor “is to say that it is God’s compassion for the most afflicted” (Segundo: 125).

[45] *The “poor” designates both the economically destitute and other victims of injustice.* A persistent concern raised in reflection upon the option for the poor is the membership of the category “poor.” Who is encompassed under this option? Who are the recipients of the Christian’s preferential concern? What is the range of human need or injustice that is included under the umbrella of this option? There is continuing debate and discernment on these questions.<sup>6</sup>

[46] There appears to be universal consensus that the materially destitute are the primary referents of this term. Peter Henriot states this with simple directness: “The poor are the economically disadvantaged, the materially deprived, who as a consequence suffer powerlessness, exploitation, and oppression” (Henriot: 24). Yet there also appears to be significant agreement that the category can be broadened to encompass other victims of

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<sup>6</sup> See, for example, the insightful comments of José Vigil. James Nikoloff advocates an expansive interpretation of “the poor” to include women and homosexuals.

social marginalization and exclusion as well. *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis*, for example, states that the Church's preferential love embraces the destitute and "the immense multitudes of the hungry, the needy, the homeless, those without medical care and above all, those without hope of a better future" (John Paul II 1992a: no. 42).

[47] Similarly, Gutiérrez adopts a more expansive understanding of "the poor" by speaking of their social insignificance:

. . . the poor person is "insignificant," a person who is considered a "nonperson," someone whose full rights as a human being are not recognized. We are talking about persons without social weight, who count little in society or in the church. This is how they are seen or, more precisely, are not seen, because they are in fact invisible insofar as they are excluded in today's world. The reasons for this are diverse: lacking material goods, of course, but also having a certain skin color, being a woman, belonging to a culture held in contempt. . . . (2003: 97).

To be "poor," then, is to be insignificant and irrelevant. The poor are those whose sufferings, dreams, hopes, and deaths, are of little concern to the centers of power. The poor die every day, yet few notice and even fewer seem to care. As Gutiérrez poignantly observes, "The poor and marginalized have a deep-rooted conviction that no one is interested in their lives and misfortunes" (1992a: 24).<sup>7</sup>

[48] What is common, then, to most advocates of this option is the belief that being "poor" connotes not only economic deprivation but also social exclusion or marginality, severe violation of basic human rights, and public indifference to one's plight.

[49] The option for the poor requires a change of one's stance or "interpretative horizon" for evaluating social life and public policy. It requires looking at social life from the perspective of the victims of injustice. Adopting this option entails a shift of one's horizon for examining the society in which one lives. The U.S. Bishops express this when they write, "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" (USCCB: no. 87).

[50] Some authors speak of this shift of perspective by advocating the "epistemological priority" of the poor. By this they mean that the views and voices of the poor deserve a privileged, though not exclusive, hearing in social analysis and theological reflection. It is important to guard against misinterpretations of this position. It is not claimed that the views of the poor are the only correct ones, or that their proposals are the only legitimate ones. James Nikoloff phrases this insight by stating that the Christian community is called to adopt "the viewpoint, or standpoint, of the poor, not necessarily their views" (527). The claim is that one cannot have an accurate or adequate understanding of either social reality or

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<sup>7</sup> See also the following observation: "These human beings continue to be the refuse of humanity. There are millions of people, too many in our world. Nobody knows what to do with them, and they know they don't count for anybody" (cited in Sobrino: 74).

Christian faith without attending to the voices and views of those whose voices are the most muted and whose views are most easily dismissed.

[51] Thus the option for the poor demands a change of perspective, whereby one evaluates social decisions, economic developments, and political strivings from the vantage point of the poor and powerless. In the words of the U.S. Bishops:

Decisions must be judged in the light of what they do for the poor, what they do to the poor, and what they enable the poor to do for themselves. The fundamental moral criterion for all economic decisions, policies, and institutions is this: They must be in the service of all people, especially the poor (USCCB: no. 24).

[52] *The option for the poor requires a radical conversion and the development of a new spirituality.* The just-described shift of horizon, the taking on of a new perspective, entails a conversion of heart and spirit. Gutiérrez defines conversion as “a radical transformation of ourselves; it means thinking, feeling, and living as Christ” (1984: 95). Taking on the viewpoint of the poor and entering into their world to some degree and in some fashion demands just such a thoroughgoing and profound change – indeed a “break” with and abandonment of our settled securities and comfortable certitudes that are rooted in and reflective of the dominant culture’s stigmatization of the poor and powerless (1988: 118). John Paul insightfully unites the conversion required of the option for the poor with the conversion entailed in “thinking, living, and feeling as Christ”:

. . . [I]t will be necessary above all to abandon a mentality in which the poor—as individuals and as peoples—are considered a burden, as irksome intruders trying to consume what others have produced. . . . Love for others, and in the first place love for the poor, in whom the Church sees Christ himself, is made concrete in the promotion of justice (1992b: nos. 28, 58).

[53] The option for the poor, therefore, is a commitment to a way of being in the world; it is a fundamental decision to be involved with and concerned about the insignificant of our world. It is a decision to begin and remain committed to the process of learning of the poor and from the poor, to make their plight and struggles our own, so that we no longer speak of the poor as “them,” but as “us.” The option for the poor demands a conversion such that we no longer see the poor as strangers, but as fellow citizens and members of the household of God (cf. Ephesians 2:19).

[54] Thus conversion to Christ demands a turn to and sensitivity toward the poor that results in a praxis of justice on behalf of our world’s least, forgotten, neglected and scorned. This in turn entails a decisive shift in our attitudes, thoughts and actions, so as to be freed from any impediment which hinders our ability to encounter the Christ who presents himself in the “distressing disguise” of the poor and wretched of the earth.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> The idea that we encounter Christ in “the distressing disguise of the poor” is one I have heard attributed to Blessed Mother Theresa of Calcutta, though I am unable to locate the exact citation. Roberto Goizueta expresses a similar thought about the need to enter into the world of the poor when he writes: “The option for the poor necessarily implies an option for the lived faith of the poor, an option for the spirituality of the poor. To opt for the poor is necessarily to pray as the poor and to talk to the God to whom the poor pray” (149).

[55] The option for the poor thus requires nothing less than a Copernican shift in the Christian's way of being in the world. It calls for a re-centering, reprioritizing, and revaluing. It demands placing the needs and cries of the poor at the center of our attention, and giving their voices and plight a privileged hearing and claim. The option for the poor thus challenges long-standing cultural beliefs, theological habits, and ecclesial practices. As Roberto Goizueta avows: "God's preferential solidarity with those victims is an inescapable challenge – *the* inescapable challenge – for Christian theology at the dawn of the twenty-first century" (144; emphasis in the original). To do theology and act for justice from a stance of real solidarity with the poor profoundly reformulates the whole question of what theology should be doing. This cannot but have major implications for how Christians engage the call to struggle against poverty and for the lives of the impoverished.

### The Option for the Poor in a Post-Katrina Church

[56] What, then, does the option require of believers and citizens who live in a culture of indifference to the poor? I lift up the following for our consideration and reflection.

[57] The option for the poor demands a deeper commitment of individual Christians and the corporate Church to the cause of the poor. Allow me to state this challenge more pointedly: Does the Church believe its own faith concerning the centrality of the poor to its mission and identity? It is a principle of ecclesiology that the Church does not, properly speaking, have a mission. Rather, "Christ's mission creates itself a Church" (Sobrinho: 21). The Church is called to be faithful to the mission of its Founder, who came to proclaim good news to the poor, liberty to captives, and freedom for the oppressed (Luke 4:16-19). What is at stake for the Church, then, is not simply effective social praxis or successful pastoral ministry, but rather the integrity of its faith and its very identity as the community of Christ's disciples.

[58] Yet some may wonder if the option for the poor is truly "*in possessione*," that is, whether the option for poor is really a fundamental commitment, a doctrinal conviction, and a pastoral priority for the Christian community. Jon Sobrinho, for one, avows: "The Churches have always had some interest in the poor, but these days they do not make it a central and decisive reality, nor do they risk much for its sake" (26). Are Christians, for example, during this election season being exhorted to evaluate candidates and their platforms through the lens of how they impact the poor and socially despised as a master principle, or as merely one criterion among many? If not, then it is difficult to rebut the contention that the option for the poor "is in danger of being watered down and manipulated" (Sobrinho: 20).

[59] *The option for the poor demands a proactive concern for racial justice.* Any strategy to reduce poverty in the United States must confront the deep connection between poverty and racism. As the U.S. bishops observed in their pastoral letter, *Economic Justice for All*, though the majority of the poor in our nation are white, "the rates of poverty are highest among those who have borne the brunt of racial prejudice and discrimination" (USCCB: no. 181). Because racism both exacerbates the poverty of those who are poor and results in economic disadvantage even for those who are not, a faith-inspired concern for the poor and socially vulnerable demands a proactive struggle against the evil of racism.

[60] Let us not underestimate how difficult this will be. If race functions as a largely unconscious frame of perception, subtly influencing our evaluation of social reality and

covertly limiting the scope of our compassion, then effective struggle against poverty demands relationships of authentic interracial solidarity. Indeed, it is only through such relationships that the racial majority can be freed from the blinders that skew their vision of social reality (cf. Massingale 2000).

[61] *The option for the poor requires an understanding that social power and coercion are necessary for the achievement of justice.* This is a difficult realization to address within the framework of Catholic Social Teaching. Catholic Social Doctrine tends to assume that it is addressing an audience composed of “men and women of goodwill”—that is to say, people who are sinners, yet enabled by God’s grace to see the right and do the good with encouragement, persuasion, and exhortation. But a view from the “underside of history” severely tests this assumption. It is a common belief among the victims of injustice that, in the words of Martin Luther King, Jr., the socially privileged seldom surrender their privileges voluntarily: “We know through painful experience that freedom is never voluntarily given by the oppressor; it must be demanded by the oppressed” (292). In other words, calls for social and systemic change arouse a resistance and recalcitrance in the privileged that yields only in the face of sustained demands, determined pressure, ideological struggle, and nonviolent social conflict.

[62] Thus embracing the option for the poor in a culture of indifference requires prophetic denunciation of the anti-evangelical condition in which the majority of the human community lives. One cannot live this option without, for example, condemning as scandalous the reality that as few as 24% of minority students graduate high school in some of our nation’s school districts and as outrageous the indifference with which this news is received by the public (Kozol: 2005). We cannot hesitate to label as an affront to the Christian conscience that fact that many corporate officials and entertainers have personal fortunes that exceed the national budgets of the poorest nations (Sobrin: 25-26).

[63] Of course, prophetic denunciation and outrage are insufficient in themselves. They must be informed by sound social analysis and lead to effective social policy. Yet such denunciation is an indispensable means for piercing the callus of indifference. It is an essential witness to truth that penetrates the veil cloaking the impoverished multitudes from our awareness. One cannot be “good news for the poor” without at the same time speaking against those concrete social conditions that render people destitute and their life situations precarious. Denunciation – that is, bringing to light the evils of social reality and calling them by their right names – is an essential part of the option for the poor.

[64] The option for the poor demands a comprehensive commitment to the cause of life, that is, being “unconditionally pro-life” demands becoming “anti-poverty.” During his final pastoral visit to the United States, John Paul II challenged people of good will to be “unconditionally pro-life” and in that context, called for a proactive struggle against euthanasia, the death penalty, and “every form of racism” (1999: 601). Our faith leaders rightly lift up a concern over the practice of abortion. Yet if it is true that one hundred thousand people die of hunger and its immediate consequences every day (not to mention the millions who die yearly from malaria, cholera, polio, and other preventable diseases), then one must question the disproportionate concern given to abortion as the paramount

life issue for political discernment in *Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship*.<sup>9</sup> As the liberation theologians often remark, “poverty = death.” The poor often die unjust premature deaths from preventable causes. To put this even more starkly, given the resources existing in our world, “A child who dies of hunger today dies murdered” (Sobrino: 140). A concern for life demands an unsparing ethical assessment of political policies and platforms that impact the lives of the most endangered among God’s creation: the voiceless millions whose cries are unheard, whose plight is neglected, and whose deaths are unnoticed. Such moral scrutiny includes policies concerning abortion – and much more.

[65] *Finally, an option for the poor in a post-Katrina context requires the cultivation of the virtue of hope.* A sober assessment of the obstacles to genuine justice, and an uncompromising evaluation of the indifference which attends the plight of the poor, can give rise to cynicism, resignation, or despair. One can feel discouraged when faced with the magnitude of the challenge before us. Thus it is important to realize that the option for the poor is a faith-inspired commitment, a “theocentric option.” That is, we make this fundamental choice not because of our social analysis, economic assessments, or political calculus, as important as these factors may be in other contexts. The option for the poor is rooted in our faith in the God of Jesus Christ who, through his cross and resurrection, reveals that human tragedies are a prelude for new beginnings that are unimaginable and undreamed. The option for the poor, in the deepest sense, is an act of hope in God. It is a witness to the religious conviction that God is continually at work in the world, creating possibilities for justice and “a new heavens and new earth.”

## Conclusion

[52] The Katrina-event challenges the authenticity of the Church’s professed commitment to the poor in light of the massive scandal of hidden poverty that it revealed among us. As the noted evangelical activist, Jim Wallis, noted so well: “Katrina has revealed what was already there in America – an invisible and mostly silent poverty that we have chosen not to talk about, let alone take responsibility for in the richest nation on earth.” Katrina thus is a wake-up call not only for our nation, but even more importantly, for the faith community, as it discerns this country’s future political leadership.

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<sup>9</sup> As an African American, I feel compelled to point out that the document’s assertion that the unborn’s right to life is the fundamental right upon which all other rights depend is difficult to reconcile with the historical reality that at a time when abortion was universally proscribed in our country, black lives were subjected to sadistic and brutal lynching with widespread impunity.

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