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12. From Salvation to Liberation

The Identity of the “Poor” in Latin American Catholicism

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Abstract

After nearly five hundred years of oppression (1492-1962) in Latin America, the theological status of the poor has radically changed from those subject to oppression to those needing liberation. This occurred through a radical re-orientation of the Catholic Church and its relationship to the world, a new understanding of the kingdom of God, and a newly accepted view of history as dynamic. Through all this shifting of ecclesial self-understanding and re-evaluation, who was poor and what it meant to be poor went through a startling transformation of identity. An example illustrative of this transformation is evident in the documents of the Latin American bishops at their conference in 1968. Despite this significant change, one that can be dated to Vatican II, Latin America is a region divided by the Church’s teaching on the poor and their liberation.

Keywords: liberation, ecclesiology, Catholic social thought, kingdom of God, Latin America, Medellín conference, preferential option for the poor, Vatican II

Introduction

Since its arrival [to Latin America] in the early sixteenth century, the institutional church has been marked by its wealth, power and privilege. As centuries passed, the church did little to change the daily hardships faced by the poor and powerless. During the conquest, millions of indigenous inhabitants suffered untold misery from war, disease, and slave-like conditions under Spanish conquistadores who claimed the name of Christ (Tombs: xi).

The poor for colonial Latin American Roman Catholicism were those human beings willed by God to suffer here on earth, those who could not change their situation due to the divinely ordained order, and those whose *souls* were the subject of church ministry. The identity of this group known as the “poor” was established through a particular understanding of history as static, the relationship of the church to the world (especially realized through a striving for the kingdom of God as heaven) and the political underpinnings of the Catholic Church’s participation in the conquest.

After nearly five hundred years of oppression (1492-1962), the *theological* status of the poor radically changed from those subject to oppression, to those needing liberation. This occurred through a radical re-orientation of the Church and its relationship to the world, a new understanding of the kingdom of God, and a newly accepted view of history as dynamic.

Through all this shifting of ecclesial self-understanding and re-evaluation, who was poor and what it meant to be poor underwent a startling transformation of identity. An example illustrative of this transformation is evident in the documents of the Latin American bishops at their conference in 1968. Despite this significant change that one can date to Vatican II, Latin America is currently a region divided by the Church’s teaching on the poor and their liberation.

The Problem: Two Churches in One Latin America

There is an interesting contrast in what the Catholic Church represents if one visits the main cathedral in the Archdiocese of San Salvador. On the main level is a traditional cathedral constructed in the shape of a cross with huge side altars and a main altar some distance away from the front pews. The seat for the archbishop is situated as far back toward the rear wall as possible (as of 2009). Liturgies in the main cathedral tend to be very traditional, with little input or participation from people in the pews.

In the basement of this cathedral is a place of worship referred to as the “Romero Chapel.” Situated near the tomb of martyred Salvadoran Archbishop Oscar Romero (now St. Romero!), there is a raised altar in the middle of a circular configuration of folding chairs set up every Sunday. While the archbishop presides over the liturgy on the main level, a volunteer priest from another part of the country says Mass on the lower level every Sunday of the year. The distance between the archbishop and the congregation at the upstairs mass allows for a solemn mass with very little participation outside of the traditional parameters. The downstairs mass usually includes an interactive homily, with parishioners engaging in dialogue with the priest and each other as the meaning and application of the gospel is worked out between them. Participatory homilies, where multiple parishioners stand and contribute to the reflection on the readings, are the order of the day.

In many ways, these two masses within the one church epitomize contradicting understandings of the mission and identity of “church.” They also represent the two Catholic churches of Latin America that have co-existed, uneasily, for quite some time (see Kelly: 3-22). The understandings of church are lived out differently in style, mission, and substance – especially in terms of how the poor are understood.

The two central events in recent Latin America church history were Vatican II and Medellín. Put somewhat simplistically, ecclesiastical leaders were guided by two different views of the church. Many bishops and priests in Latin America may be considered conservatives, because they still follow a pre-Vatican II ecclesiology. For them the church is essentially a spiritual monarchy that functions along hierarchical and paternalistic lines, from top to bottom. According to this model the bishops, who represent the magisterium (the teaching power) of the church, see themselves as teaching authorities commissioned to teach the truth to the faithful. The duty of the faithful is to listen to these teachings. Generally, *conservative bishops* and priests work closely with tradition-minded *cultural elites*. By way of contrast, the Vatican Council proposed the model of the church as community, which, without ceasing to be hierarchical, aims to encourage intercommunication, spontaneous participation, and fraternal dialogue. Bishops, priests, religious and laity who opt for this model see themselves more as pastors called to help the faithful to grow in maturity and to assume leadership roles (Klaiber 1994: 15, emphasis mine).

The differences between these two churches do not end there. Conservatives in the Latin American church strongly believe that faith and spirituality are individual, vertical, and ultimately *personal* realities that manifest themselves socially by worshipping with fellow Catholics. Progressives embrace the new Vatican II teaching that calls the faithful to actively work for the kingdom of God in and through the transformation of political, economic, and social realities. They believe the purpose of the church is to encourage societal transformation in a manner consistent with the ministry and preference of Jesus for the marginalized, evident throughout the gospels. “For conservatives, unity and religious uniformity are positive values” (Klaiber 1994: 15), which manifest themselves in unquestioning acceptance of abstract doctrine relating to faith and spirituality. This acceptance is concretized or contextualized through personal moral decision-making. The type of education that both conservatives and progressives promote, while both Catholic, are also markedly different.¹

¹ “On a formal educational level, the church runs private schools for the wealthy, the middle class and the poor. In some schools for the wealthy, such as those run by Opus Dei, a pre-Vatican II mindset prevails and emphasis is placed on individual advancement. But in others, especially those run by the Jesuits, solidarity with the poor is emphasized. On the popular level, the *Fe y Alegría* schools for the poor stress civic participation and commitment to building the local community. The same divisions may be found in Catholic universities: some incorporate the ideals of social responsibility in their programs, but others simply foster an individualism that is more in tune with neo-liberalism” (Klaiber 2009: 407).

The question of context and how it is addressed has seriously challenged the unity and message of the Catholic Church in Latin America. Progressive Catholics seek to understand and embrace religious and cultural pluralism and try to understand the gospel and its demands in the actual world of people *where they live – socially, economically and politically*. Context becomes the lens through which they understand the gospel – it is part of how one reads and integrates one’s Christianity. If one is poor and indigenous, will he or she see and understand the gospel in the same way as someone wealthy and from the cultural elite? Progressive Catholicism in Latin America – that is, Catholicism in the spirit and tone of Vatican II – believes that context deeply affects how one appropriates religious faith.

The differences between conservatives and progressives go even deeper on other levels. Early in the colonial enterprise, bishops and other church leaders were almost always wealthy Europeans. It is true that the church had some Creole bishops (from the upper class of the colonial caste system), *mestizo* priests (mixed-race), and a few indigenous missionaries in the frontier areas, but the church was fundamentally a foreign and largely Spanish institution (see Berryman for further analysis). After the initial conquest, priests who came from mixed or indigenous ancestry were mainly formed and trained in their own country where they shared very similar conditions with those whom they served. Thus, the leadership, typically imported from Italy, came to be defined by its Roman or European ancestry (and later training), while the priest and his parishioners were perceived to share the same context. Bolivia, for example, has only recently had a cardinal-archbishop from Bolivia. Conversely, most diocesan priests from the lower classes were trained in their own country when seminaries began to form. The lower economic and social classes, in general, participated in what later was characterized as “popular” Catholicism, a blending of Christianity with certain indigenous beliefs (see Menchu). These two types of Catholicism, official and popular, have existed side by side for centuries.

The division between official and popular Catholicism has resulted in deep divisions within the church, and its consequences are far-reaching. One can only generalize here, but the official church is usually comprised of members of the cultural elite (oligarchy) and senior clerical leadership (bishops, archbishops, and cardinals), who embrace an institutional Catholicism concerned with cultic obligation and doctrinal orthodoxy. Popular Catholicism comprises *the people* (almost universally poor) and clerics who emerge from this under-class who embrace a form of religiosity that addresses the very real and direct challenge of living life in an oppressive, dangerous environment. In this paper I take into account theological presuppositions that frame two different worldviews and two different understandings of the poor, and I illustrate that how we frame the identity of the poor emerges from multiple presuppositions.

Factors in Defining the Poor

If I were to ask the readers to put aside all distractions, close your eyes, and ponder for a moment the notion of “poor person,” a myriad of thoughts may arise that emerge from a variety of presuppositions. The obvious thoughts may include images of poverty, both in terms of people and places. As we go deeper, the role and function of context may creep in. Deeper yet, we would have to think about human agency which includes notions such as responsibility, choice, freedom, and possibly oppression or repression. All of these factors

point to the poor as situated within a constellation of notions, all requiring some specification to get at what we mean. Allow me to offer two extremes to illustrate this.

I have heard the following description of the poor person from innumerable students over the years: a poor person is poor for reasons of ignorance, laziness, or immorality . . . they refuse to work to support themselves and/or those dependent upon them . . . their situation is of their own making and because they made it, they should get out of it themselves as we all have equal opportunities to succeed in this wonderful country.

The next description comes from a progressive activist in Latin America: a poor person is poor for reasons of systemic oppression; they were born into contexts that began with a lack of life's necessities such as nutrition, education, and opportunity and this context continues to dehumanize them for their entire life . . . they are not agents of their own destiny; they have never developed their own voice, and they will continue their non-reflective existence of drudgery until they die a premature death.

I am not interested in debating the relative merits or deficiencies of either explanation, which is another paper altogether. I *am* interested in examining some of their presuppositions – notions that are given and rarely examined carefully – these are key to the identity of the poor. The reason this is interesting to me is that the radical sea-change (and I do not use that term lightly), in Latin America during and after Vatican II required a shift in presuppositions. This shift did not occur across all populations and, therefore, there is conflict today. I delineate these presuppositions in the rest of my paper. For the sake of simplicity I frame these presuppositions as before and after Vatican II; I conclude with how the Latin American bishops navigated this shift and identify the poor in the late 1960s.

Before Vatican II

In his book, *An Account, Much Abbreviated, of the Destruction of the Indies*, Bartolomeo de Las Casas recounts in graphic detail precisely how the Spanish conquerors caused so much suffering to those in the New World. At one point, he describes a priest baptizing the natives as they descended into the mines where many died that day. The purpose of baptism was to save the souls of the natives. But what of the bodies and the communities comprised of those bodies? Why were the bodies perceived as separate, less important, even disposable? Why were souls *not connected* to bodies? While there was general sympathy for the suffering of native peoples, one's earthly existence, to be honest, was not all that important. In multiple stories from Las Casas' recollection of the Spanish conquest, priests always seemed to be present when people were being tortured and killed, but ostensibly only to save their souls. Undoubtedly, priests considered themselves powerless to change the situation that caused such suffering. The following is one of many exchanges where those representing the church emphasize the next life over the present.

This cacique [chief] and lord was constantly fleeing from the Christians, from the moment they came to that island of Cuba, being one who knew them well, and he would defend himself when he came upon them, but at last they captured him. And for no reason but that he fled such iniquitous and cruel people, and defended himself from those who wished to slay him and oppress him until the death of him and all his people and the succeeding

generations, they burned him alive. And when he was bound to the stake, a friar of the order of Saint Francis, a holy father who was thereby, spoke some things to him concerning God and our faith, which he had never heard before – or as much as what that friar was able in the short time that the executioners gave him – and the friar asked if the lord wished to believe those things that he told him, for if he did he would go to sky (that is, heaven), where there was glory and eternal rest, but if not, he would certainly go to hell and suffer perpetual torments and sufferings. And thinking a while, the lord asked the Holy Father whether Christians went to the sky. The priest replied that they did, but only those who were good. And the cacique then said without thinking on it any more, that he did not desire to go to the sky, but rather down to hell, so that he would not be where *they* were and would not see such cruel people (de Las Casas: 19).

It is not true that the church thought only souls had value and bodies were worthless; that is too superficial. Rather, one could argue that when the spiritual is over-emphasized without the positive inclusion or connection to the corporeal, we have diminished the human being and all human beings. This diminishment, in turn, has real-world consequences. Such a move also diminishes what it means to save a human being. This view of the human person emerges from a dualistic understanding of Christ made popular by Platonic influences in the history of Christian theology. It will nearly always disdain the earthly in favor of the heavenly and the body in favor of the soul.

One could speculate that the church was so concerned with abstract, idealized human beings (their *abstracted* instead of *embodied* souls), that it missed the suffering of human beings. If souls were the focus of salvation, bodies and their sufferings were not as important. This belief and the practices that resulted from it were only possible through the embrace of a strong dualism where body and soul were seen as connected, only out of necessity, here on earth. Truly, only the soul was the object of salvation. This understanding leads to a diminishment of the importance of this world and the relevance of the conditions in which human beings live. When this diminishment is combined with classicist understanding of human history as settled and unchanging, the result became deadly.

History

Imagine if there is no such thing as change and human beings have no sense of working toward progress. With this worldview, both a faithful patience anticipating the end times and an acceptance of one's place in life as willed by God become necessary. In some ways, walking into a medieval monastery and leaving the outside world behind was a deep affirmation of this opinion. For the medieval mind, why was the world as it was? God willed it to be so. Why did God will it to be so? God's plan is beyond human understanding, but nevertheless demands human acceptance. Narrow and literal interpretations of certain scriptural passages also encouraged this understanding. For example, consider Romans 13: "Let everyone person be subject to the governing authorities; for there is no authority except from God, and those authorities that exist have been instituted by God. Therefore whoever resists authority resists what God has appointed, and those who resist will incur judgment" (13:1-2). Changing societal structures is close to impossible if leaders rule by divine right.

When the Jesuits embarked upon the creation of missions in South America, they were inspired, in part, by St. Thomas Moore's book *Utopia*. Moore wrote of an imaginary island country named Utopia where people owned land in common, men and women were educated in an equal manner, and there was a healthy degree of religious toleration. Published in 1516, this work inspired others to imagine new societies throughout the Renaissance (1300–1650), Enlightenment (1650–1800), and so on. Although this work was about an imaginary community, it inspired questions regarding what could be done to change society.

For many in the Catholic Church, the idea that human beings could or should change society (i.e., social structures) was considered arrogant. The prevailing belief was that only the author of human history could change human history, including the social levels and societal structures that were understood to have been established by divine will (as in the previous quote from Romans). How else can one explain the passive (and active) acceptance of slavery by Christianity for nearly eighteen hundred years? How can the church explain that Catholic social teaching did not formally develop until the late nineteenth century? Historically, why has there been so much resistance by the church to new developments in the sciences, philosophy, and art?

The state of peoples and human society, generally what we call history, was understood by the church as a static reality with the incarnation at its center. Time was divided between, before, or after Jesus of Nazareth. God created the world and human society. If God wanted social reality to be different, God would initiate such a change. Human beings were seen as weak, sinful, and utterly dependent on God. They can do nothing on their own to change what had been established. Theologically speaking, life was perceived as a vale of tears. God ordained both fixed social positions and an inseparable obedience to God, the church, and the colonial order. Ordinary believers were left to find solace in their prayers for charity and their hope for a better life in the *next* world.

From this worldview, how does one live in relation to a world full of suffering and want? Does one wait patiently for the end times (in theological terms, the *eschaton*? On the contrary, human misery and desire was addressed through charity.² While they never intended or hoped to change the world, many monasteries and other forms of cloistered life were the source of incredible amounts of charity.

According to historian Peter Hatlie, monasteries were the main sources of charity throughout the early church (43-47). Palestinian monks probably began this commitment with their houses for pilgrims who wished to visit the Holy Land. In the late fifth century, monks and monasteries were known to manage everything from hotels to almshouses, as well as other charitable institutions. According to Hatlie, as monks provided more charity to outsiders, “they also became more consistent in their defense of suffering and vulnerable populations.” Additionally monks served as counselors, teachers, and arbitrators of disputes, and, most importantly, “monks prayed for people. By doing so they were thought by contemporaries to do much good in the world” (44).

² This word “charity” is not to be confused with the theological virtue of *caritas*. The word “charity,” as it is understood today, refers to meeting the immediate needs of people but not the cause of those needs.

At the same time, service to the poor was oddly divorced from the material needs of the people who wanted to live humane lives. A humane life would be one where the material necessities for human growth and development were always present. This divorce between the material lives of people and the ordering of social reality continued into medieval times.

Inherent in the writings of John Chrysostom, Basil, Jerome, and Augustine of Hippo is contempt for wealth, a sense that the individual could strive for God only by rejecting the material. Their injunctions to aid the poor thus reflected a spiritual motivation quite divorced from the economic and social realities of poverty. While a genuine concern for human suffering must have played some role in patristic thought, nonetheless, this attitude lent a ritualistic character to charity in the early Middle Ages. For example, cathedral churches and, later, monasteries would support poor persons, often called the *matricularii*, who frequently were fixed in number at the apostolic twelve. Monastic hospitality, too, developed its own ritual in the form of the welcome, the washing of the feet, the provision of hospitality (i.e., food and shelter), and the presentation of a farewell gift. Such folk were treated more as symbols than as real people because the monks viewed themselves as the real 'poor of Christ,' having voluntarily laid aside the accoutrements of power for a life of humility. Those assisted did not represent any particular economic group or class because this was a society of serfs and tenant farmers where most people by any sort of objective standard could be labeled as poor. Instead, charity focused on travelers, rich and poor alike, whose distress was of a temporary and transient nature (Brodman).

So what are we left with at the close of this section? A preference for the spiritual over the material, a notion of history as static, and a model of engagement with the world that is essentially charity – or meeting the immediate needs of those who are poor or suffer. All of these worldviews will shift, and shift radically at Vatican II. So will the identity of the poor.

After Vatican II

Vatican II responded to massive changes in the world, including technological, political, and developmental challenges that had been slowly emerging over time. The council began a deep reflection on what it meant to be a church in and for this world. One of the key developments at Vatican II, one that re-shaped the church's mission and identity, was how the kingdom of God was understood and how the church was active in the world.

The difference in the mission of the church set forth at Vatican II is critically important. *Lumen gentium* clearly states the purpose of the church: "Its end is the *kingdom of God* which has been begun by God himself on earth, and which must be further extended until it is brought to perfection by him at the end of time, when Christ, our life (see Colossians 3:4) shall appear and 'creation itself will be delivered from its slavery to corruption into the freedom of the glory of the sons of God'" (Vatican II 1965b: 9; italics mine). This community, this new people of God will be the *instrument* through which God brings about the kingdom of God on earth – a kingdom where the will of God and the will of human beings will unite to form a new social and spiritual reality. The spirit-matter dualism of the

pre-Vatican II Church has been shattered, and all of sudden this world and its concerns really matter!

In the past, church doctrine on the kingdom of God taught one of two things. The kingdom of God was spiritualized as “heaven,” and thus the goal of all Christian life (realized not in this world, but in the next), or the church taught that it was the kingdom of God on earth, in line with the thinking of its earlier ecclesiology. Now, the Catholic Church is no longer strictly identified with perfection, and less so strictly with the kingdom of God. Vatican II identifies the Church as being in service to the kingdom. Such a small change in language represents a *significant* change in theology.

It is no longer for the glory of the church that one works. Rather, the people of God work for the kingdom of God, as the Lord’s Prayer has always reminded us. “Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth . . .” In order for this to happen, the church must be in service to something beyond itself. In fact, it must enter more deeply into the world above which it formerly viewed itself. This service to the world and for the world is the new work of the church. According to Vatican II this task falls especially to the laity.

The final document of Vatican II, *Gaudium et spes*, articulates the church’s role in service to the world. Recognizing that the church must work for the kingdom of God here on earth, it has and will have much to say as it guides and encourages a particular approach to social reality. This is evident from the document’s first, famous paragraph.

The joys and the hopes, the griefs and the anxieties of the men of this age, especially those who are poor or in any way afflicted, these are the joys and hopes, the griefs and anxieties of the followers of Christ. Indeed, nothing genuinely human fails to raise an echo in their hearts. For theirs is a community composed of men. United in Christ, they are led by the Holy Spirit in their journey to the Kingdom of their Father and they have welcomed the news of salvation which is meant for every man. That is why this community realizes that it is truly linked with mankind and its history by the deepest of bonds (1965a: 1).

In one, clear opening paragraph, the perception of the church as isolated and separate from the world, a static view of history and the dualism that had only focused on “the above,” have all been effectively left behind. As the document says in its introduction, “Thus, the human race has passed from *a rather static concept of reality to a more dynamic, evolutionary one*. In consequence there has arisen a new series of problems, a series as numerous as can be, calling for efforts of analysis and synthesis” (1965a: 5; italics mine). Here is a human community deeply concerned with the world, “especially those who are poor or in any way afflicted.” This statement introduces what has become one of the signature aspects of the new church mission – a preferential option for the poor.

Contemporary Latin America

Because of the radical shift at Vatican II characterized by a new humanism which understands the person as a body-soul unity embodied in a dynamic history which can be shaped according to or against God’s will, the identity of the poor has revolved around questions of “agency.” Allow me to give some examples.

Populorum progressio, Pope Paul VI's 1967 encyclical *On the Development of Peoples* held the "poor" to be a term with both material and moral connotations. His definition of development first began in the material world. Do people have the basic necessities that allow for survival, community, social development, and the creation of culture? When those have been addressed, it becomes possible to address other, critical areas of human development. Material poverty and moral poverty are similarly damaging to the human person. Material poverty does not allow for the development of human potential because of a lack of resources and opportunities. Moral poverty does not allow for the development of human potential because of avarice. Both material and moral poverty suggest questions of agency. In material poverty, the poor are unable to develop because of a lack of resources available. In moral poverty the rich are unable to develop morally because of selfish consumption of too many resources.

When the Latin American bishops met at Medellín in 1968, they devoted themselves to supporting ways of increasing agency of the material poor. The call to strengthen unions of workers and associations of peasants thus represented a continuation of Catholic social teaching and was consistent with church tradition. What was different was the context into which this teaching would move. Nevertheless, the Latin American Bishops were clear in their support of both workers and peasants. Medellín's final "Document on Justice," noted the centrality of organized labor and peasants.

Therefore, in the intermediary professional structure the peasants' and workers' unions, to which the workers have a right, should acquire sufficient strength and power. Their associations will have a unified and responsible strength, to exercise the right of representation and participation on the levels of production and of national, continental, and international trade. They ought to exercise their right of being represented, also, on the social, economic, and political levels, where decisions are made which touch upon the common good. Therefore, the unions ought to use every means at their disposal to train those who are to carry out these responsibilities in moral, economic, and especially in technical matters (CELAM: 102).

There is no doubt that in many countries of Latin America, workers and peasants usually subsisted on survival wages, often paid in food. This new call to organize directly threatened the entrenched oligarchy whose economic interests depended upon cheap and easily available labor.

Perhaps most shockingly, the Second Conference of Latin American Bishops took a long, critical look at itself, the role of the church throughout Latin America, and sought to change its relationship to its own wealth. This is evident in the following:

And complaints that the hierarchy, the clergy, the religious, are rich and allied with the rich also come to us. On this point we must make it clear that appearance is often confused with reality. Many causes have contributed to create this impression of a rich hierarchical church. The great buildings, the rectories and religious houses that are better than those of the neighbors, the often luxurious vehicles, the attire, inherited from other eras, have been some of those causes (CELAM: 114).

Confronting this perception became very important in the document and rightly so, for in order to shift one's mission and pastoral work toward the integral development of all, there must be an honest recognition of one's own privilege and wealth. The bishops acknowledged this reality with a self-critical honesty rarely found in episcopal conference documents.

Within the context of the poverty and even of the wretchedness in which the great majority of the Latin American people live, we, bishops, priests, and religious, have the necessities of life and a certain security, while the poor lack that which is indispensable and struggle between anguish and uncertainty. And incidents are not lacking in which the poor feel that their bishops, or pastors and religious, do not really identify themselves with them, with their problems and afflictions, that they do not always support those who work with them or plead their cause (CELAM: 115).

In response to this perception, the document reflects upon different forms of poverty – material, spiritual, and evangelical. The first form of poverty addressed is material poverty, which is “a lack of the goods of this world necessary to live worthily as human beings, [and] is in itself evil. The prophets denounce this kind of poverty as contrary to the will of the Lord and most of the time as the fruit of human injustice and sin” (CELAM: 115). No person should aspire to this form of poverty. All people ought to respond or struggle to end this type of poverty.

The second type of poverty is spiritual poverty, an attitude that disposes a person to do God's will in the world. We are not our own meaning-givers; God is our meaning-giver. When this is so, while we can “value the goods of this world, we do not become attached to them and we recognize the higher value of the riches of the kingdom” (CELAM: 115). Finally, there is evangelical poverty, which happens when those with the means to live a comfortable life choose simplicity and austerity in order to be in solidarity with those who suffer from material poverty in the world. Two benefits emerge from embracing evangelical poverty: first, one realizes what is most important by not focusing on material wealth, and second, one's life becomes a testimony that elevates an awareness of the suffering of others in the world. Evangelical poverty can take various forms. Among the celibate and ordained it may mean immersion at a level of material discomfort that would be difficult for families with small children. For lay people, it may mean a way of living that affirms countercultural values such as simplicity, service, and an active engagement with marginalized peoples.

Conclusion

For the Church of Latin America, the poor are those who lack the agency to overcome whatever diminishes their humanity. The poor is a category that transcends class and income. The materially poor suffer from a lack of necessities, which are a priority and should be addressed first. The morally poor suffer from an attachment to the goods of this world and typically own a disproportionate amount of worldly goods. The response to the materially poor is to increase their agency so they become “agents of their own destiny,” not objects of dependence and hence, oppression. The morally poor can aspire to an evangelical poverty that re-orders their relationship to prosperity and, therefore, to ways of life that include and serve the materially poor. The Latin American bishops wrote documents both

on how to address material poverty as well as a document on how to minister to “pastoral elites.” In both cases, human development is understood holistically as a movement from less human to more human conditions. The church attempted to increase the agency of both groups in poverty to facilitate such development.

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