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THE PREFERENTIAL OPTION FOR THE POOR AND CREDIBILITY OF THE CHURCH

A b s t r a c t. The category of option for the poor emerged in Latin America at the turn of the 60s and 70s of the 20th century, as a result of authentication of faith and personal, communitarian, social and ecclesiastical life. The article consists of three parts. In the first part, the key question of the article is discussed, namely: “What is the Preferential Option for the Poor?” In the second part, the place of the poor in God’s plan of salvation and in the mission of the Church, are presented. The final part, deals with the issue of the option for the poor as a sign of the credibility of the Church. Experiencing God in the context of poverty and injustice in the modern world makes the option for the poor a sign of the credibility of the Church and Christianity.

Key words: credibility; the poor; poverty; preferential option for the poor; the poor Church; CELAM; the Church in Latin America; Latin American Theology.

The Church’s preferential option for the poor arose at the turn of the 1960s and 70s in Latin America as the result of internal and external validation of the faith, and personal, community, social and ecclesiastical life.¹ The pastoral and theological renewal at that time had a decisive influence on

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¹ This article is based on my previous research, in particular: “Opcja na rzecz ubogich”, *Studia Nauk Teologicznych PAN* 8(2014), 47-62; *Opcja na rzecz ubogich znakiem wiarygodności Kościoła* (Pieniężno, 2002); “Ignacio Ellacuría. Teoria poświęcona męczeństwem”, in *Leksykon wielkich teologów XX/XXI wieku*, eds. Józef Majewski, Jarosław Makowski (Warszawa: Więż, 2006), 101-111; *Modele ewangelizacji kultur i inkulturacji wiary w teologii latynoamerykańskiej* (Lublin: Wydawnictwo KUL, 2013); “Znaki wiarygodności Kościoła. Opcja na rzecz ubogich”, in *Leksykon Teologii Fundamentalnej*, ed. Marian Rusecki (Lublin-Kraków: Wydawnictwo M, 2002), 1390-1392.

its formation. Even before the Second Vatican Council, in the context of various initiatives for motivating the faithful and Church institutions, attention was paid to the need of discerning the social and religious context, including difficulties experienced by Latin American nations. These efforts, strengthened by the Second Vatican Council's encouragement to read the signs of the times,² and supported by scientific evidence, led to the articulation of some key problems that needed particular pastoral action.

One of these problems was widespread poverty. It was considered that because of the scale of life-threatening situations, available forces and means should be preferentially directed to the poor, while, of course, not forgetting the other social groups. Biblical, historical and theological research and the Church's contemporary social teachings were helpful in this endeavor. After some attempts of implementation and evaluation, the preferential option for the poor entered into Papal teaching and local Churches.³ The present article introduces the topic of the „option”, in the light of Church's documents and Latin American theology.

1. WHAT IS THE PREFERENTIAL OPTION FOR THE POOR?

An answer to the above question was given by the Latin American bishops, gathered at the General Conference of the Latin American Episcopate in Puebla, who stated: “The preferential option for the poor is to proclaim Christ as the Savior who illuminates their dignity, helps them in their efforts toward liberation from all deficiencies, and brings them into communion with God and one another by living in evangelical poverty.”⁴ This idea was also articulated by Bishops at the Medellin Conference in the following statement: “The Latin American bishops cannot remain indifferent in the face of the tremendous social injustices existent in Latin America, which keep the majority of our peoples in dismal poverty, which in many cases becomes inhuman

² LG 4; 11; OT 9; DH 15; SC 43; AA 14.

³ See for example: *Apostolic Exhortation Evangelii Gaudium of the Holy Father Francis* (Vatican, 2013), n. 186-216; *Encyclical Letter Laudato Si' of the Holy Father Francis* (Vatican, 2015); “Posługa charytatywna Kościoła”, in *II Polski Synod Plenarny. 1991-1999* (Poznań: Pallottinum, 2001), n. 56; CONFERENCIA EPISCOPAL ESPAÑOLA, *La caridad en la vida de la Iglesia. Introducción doctrinal y propuestas operativas; LX asamblea plenaria de la C.E.E* (Madrid: PPC, 1994).

⁴ CELAM, *Puebla. La evangelización en el presente y en el futuro de América Latina* (Madrid: BAC, 1985), no. 1153.

wretchedness. A deafening cry pours from the throats of millions of men, asking their pastors for a liberation that reaches them from nowhere else.”⁵

John Paul II explains the option for the poor as follows: “Today more than ever, the Church is aware that her social message will gain credibility more immediately from the witness of actions than as a result of its internal logic and consistency. This awareness is also a source of her preferential option for the poor, which is never exclusive or discriminatory towards other groups. This option is not limited to material poverty, since it is well known that there are many other forms of poverty, especially in modern society—not only economic but cultural and spiritual poverty as well. The Church’s love for the poor, which is essential for her and a part of her constant tradition, impels her to give attention to a world in which poverty is threatening to assume massive proportions in spite of technological and economic progress. In the countries of the West, different forms of poverty are being experienced by groups which live on the margins of society, by the elderly and the sick, by the victims of consumerism, and more recently by so many refugees and migrants. In the developing countries, tragic crises loom on the horizon unless internationally coordinated measures are taken before it is too late.”⁶

In view of the above, the option for the poor is a proposal of subjective emancipatory and renewed activities in favor of people affected by the consequences of the lack of goods needed for development. Julio Lois, referring to research on this issue, carried out by Latin American theologians, adds that it is the intentional decision that leads to an incarnation in the world of the poor. In everyday reality, this means a wise and realistic participation in the integral liberation of the poor.⁷

Although the option for the poor belongs to the type of *promotio humana*, it is closely related to the evangelizing and missionary doctrine and tasks of the Church.⁸ Therefore, it should not be regarded only as an ordinary call to help the poor, or justified by appealing solely to human arguments and Christian morality. The option for the poor stems from God’s saving plan and the related ideas about the meaning, dignity and destination of all beings and history, about human life and the human community.

⁵ CELAM, *Medellin Conclusiones* (Bogotá: Secretariado del CELAM, 1990), 14,1.

⁶ CA 57. Accessed April 15, 2016. http://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_01.05.1991_centesimus-annus.html.

⁷ Julio LOIS, “Opción por los pobres. Síntesis doctrinal”, in *La opción por los pobres*, ed. M.J. Vigil (Santander: Sal Terrea, 1991), 9.

⁸ Mt 28:18-20; Mk 16:15-18; Luke 24:47-48 (Acts 1:8); Jn 20:21-23 (17:18-23).

This option is often referred to by the word “preferential.” Using such a term we highlight universality of the Church and its mission, and moreover, we point to the fact that the poor are not the only group to whom the Good News is addressed, and whom the Church cares for. However, it should be noted that the expression “preferential option” is, in a sense, contrary to the fact that in today’s world most people are actually poor. This quantitative argument proves that the poor are in a way the natural milieu for the Church’s activities. Along the same line goes popularized by Pope Francis’ idea of the Church, that is poor and for the poor. Such Church is understood as a space where the victims of old and modern sociocultural and religious systems find their place.

Through solidarity with the poor, and by exploring the role of creation and history, as well as the cultural and civilizational goods in the lives of peoples, the option and the idea of the Church that is poor and for the poor, lead to a Christ-centered renewal of life of all members of the Church. In a special way, however, it enables developing, together with the poor, decent living conditions, including recovering proper place in society and within the ecclesial community, as well as deepening their faith. That is why the preferential option for the poor is not a class option that excludes other social groups, although it refers to the privilege of the poor in the proclamation of the Kingdom of God through Jesus Christ, and to the Old Testament tradition.

In conclusion, the preferential option for the poor can be described as an inculturating and Evangelizing plan linking Christian faith with contemporary problems of common life, while paying particular attention to the problem of poverty. The preferential option for the poor is a call for solidarity and subjective actions for the poor; it is also a call for renewal of individual and communal life in the light of faith. The “option” is done by all baptized people and ecclesial institutions, including the poor themselves.

2. WHY DO WE CHOOSE THE PREFERENTIAL OPTION FOR THE POOR?

The contemporary phenomenon of poverty, while evoking sympathy and opposition, is undoubtedly an important argument for taking action on behalf of the poor. Empirical facts and the accompanying feelings, are here not the most important, nor are they the only reason for the Church taking on the

option for the poor. The main argument concerns the place of the poor in God's plan of salvation and in the mission of the Church.⁹

Without a doubt, the option for the poor is related to the fundamental assertions about God and His plan of salvation, the meaning of creation and history. Following theological thoughts of the final document from Puebla one can say that the option for the poor is begotten out of the truth about God, the Church, the man and the human community. The option for the poor serves this truth, and without it, theology would be unintelligible and meaningless. The God of the Judeo-Christian tradition is not a lonely and far-away demi-god of some pre-Christian religion, but the God who creates and redeems out of love, a God full of compassion, close to His creatures and present in their history. In creating man in His image and likeness in Christ, God adopts humans as His children and bestows upon them a special dignity.

Bringing to life a human person with spiritual, rational and biological structure, God also creates a human community and invites everyone to participate in the mystery of His life. He invites us to fulfil an honorable role as helpers of the Creator in the *creatio continua*. Thus, God enables humanity to build, in cooperation with Him, life sustaining existence founded on the values flowing from the source of Trinitarian love (*amor fontalis*, DM 2). This means that a community is founded on love, unity and participation, justice and peace. For similar reasons, Gustavo Gutiérrez said that "the option for the poor is ultimately standing on the side of God's kingdom as proclaimed by Jesus."¹⁰

In the practical realization of the option for the poor of particular importance is the truth that every human being is endowed with dignity, regardless of gender, race, social status and moral situation. This dignity should be seen in a holistic way by taking into account its various aspects. One must likewise remember that the biological dimension is also God's work and plays an important role in the plan of salvation, but is not limited to it. By the will

⁹ In addition to the already quoted works, it would be worthy to pay special attention to theological argumentation: Donald DORR, *Option for the poor. A hundred years of Vatican social teaching* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1992); Gustavo GUTIÉRREZ, Gerhard L. MÜLLER, *An der Seite der Armen. Theologie der Befreiung* (Augsburg: Sankt Ulrich Verlag, 2004); Gustavo GUTIÉRREZ, *Hablar de Dios desde el sufrimiento del inocente. Una reflexión sobre el libro de Job* (Salamanca: Sígueme, 1986); Gustavo GUTIÉRREZ, *We drink from our own wells. The spiritual journey of a people* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2003).

¹⁰ Gustavo GUTIÉRREZ, "Pobres y opción fundamental", in *Mysterium liberationis: Conceptos fundamentales de la teología de la liberación*, ed. Ignatio Ellacuría, Jon Sobrino (Madrid: Trotta, 1990), 309.

of the Creator, the spiritual and rational elements along with the biological dimension constitute the whole human being. Reminding of this truth is especially important in today's interdependent world, where man's difficult living conditions are not uncommon, but rather widespread. Recalling this truth is also important as there are some individuals and groups of people who run away into ahistorical spiritualization of life, which is not always compatible with Christian doctrine, and contrary to the theology of creation and salvation in Jesus Christ.

God's plan of salvation and the theology of creation provide important doctrinal premises that designate the appropriate direction of understanding and applying the preferential option for the poor. Although impoverishment, as mentioned above, is a complex phenomenon, one cannot ignore the fact that from the theological point of view, the ultimate cause of human miserable condition is the mystery of sin *i.e.*, man's departing from God's plan of salvation, and preplacing it with a variety of modern idols. That is why the fight against impoverishment, apart from evident structural changes, is also associated with a return – a conversion – to the true God who reveals himself as a defender of the weak and oppressed, merciful and just. Ultimately, only God is the motive and pattern of activities on behalf of the poor.¹¹

Within Latin American theology a thesis was developed that the prevalence of the phenomenon of poor concerns the question of God Himself, since today in the poor are verified or may be negated main assertions about God. The existence of the multitudes of poor people and the drama of their situation may give raise the question: how do we reconcile faith in God with the fact that the greater part of the world today is poor? In the face of so widespread poverty and the fragility of human life, difficult to comprehend and to accept is the problem of the "scandal of God's powerlessness". Ignacio Ellacuría states that current solutions by which we attempt to explain this problem, for example, God's permission, divine dispensation, evil and sin, although significant, are not sufficient. As a theologian, I. Ellacuría argues that, today, more credible is an explanation that the poor help us to know who is God being revealed in the Old Testament tradition and, in particular, in Jesus Christ. He is the God who protects the poor and the weak; He is the God present in the life of every human being and every community. He is also the God who loves humanity, accompanying people throughout history

¹¹ José María CASTILLO, *Los pobres y la teología. ¿Qué queda de la teología de la liberación?* (Bilbao: Desclé de Brouwer, 1997), 27-41.

through *creatio prima et contiuna*; through the incarnation of the Son and through His salvific death and resurrection. In the poor, God suffers only apparent defeat. The poor lead to God's definitive triumph, and thus they are God's "dwelling place," God's "presence," and God's "sacrament."¹²

The poor and poverty also occupy an important place in the deeds and words of Jesus Christ, and are encapsulated in the *ipsissima verba Jesu* about the Kingdom of God. The proclaimed *basileia* reveals God who is the Father filled with goodness, the one who invites us to live in communion with Him. Everyone individually and in the community accepts God's message and converts to the values of the Kingdom of God, in this way contributing to its anticipation in history, although ultimately the Kingdom is fulfilled in the time of the *parousia*. Therefore, the option for the poor makes sense if it leads to the reign of God, since individual and community *metanoia* occurs in Christ and with Christ. The poor and poverty are therefore a kind of key to understanding the message of Jesus about the Kingdom of God.

Although this message is directed to all people, it especially comes closer to the poor and those pushed aside in a variety of human relationships. Jesus first and foremost proclaims the Good News to the poor and performs miracles among them. He says that they are the victims of rejection and contempt and so now they are blessed in the Kingdom of God, and their evangelization is to the highest degree a sign of the coming of the messianic era, proving Jesus' credibility as being the Messiah. In addition, Jesus was born and lived as a poor man; He interacted with poor people, including those from marginalized socio-religious groups. There were also poor people among those following Him, such as his disciples. People who follow Jesus are merciful and compassionate, living in evangelical poverty. The New Testament teaches that our attitude towards the poor decides of our salvation.¹³

The option for the poor is also ecclesiological important. The Church is a community of disciples and missionaries of Jesus Christ, who gave them an identity and set their goals. For this reason, the Church in the world is a sign and sacrament of Christ and this also pertains to the Church's stance towards the poor and poverty. One can even argue that calling a community as being Christ-like implies that its members realize the Founder's intentions and words regarding poverty and the poor. Therefore, the option for the poor is an important way for the Church to undertake activities throughout the

¹² I. ELLACURIA, *Pobres*, 1046-1048.

¹³ A. PIETRZAK, *Opcja*, 109-140; I. ELLACURÍA, *Pobres*, 1048-1054.

world. This makes the Church one, holy, Catholic and apostolic, poor and for the poor according to the example of Jesus Christ. The option for the poor fulfils creative and enriching ecclesiastical functions.¹⁴

3. THE OPTION FOR THE POOR IS A SIGN OF THE CHURCH'S CREDIBILITY

The above-mentioned invitation for Christians to work for people living in the economic, social, cultural and religious margins is of vital importance when dealing with the issue of the credibility of the Church and Christianity in general. This specific and fresh type of *caritas* is the universally accepted test of the doctrinal and historic coherence of Christian teaching and the basic attitude of Jesus Christ himself. Latin American theologians who have largely contributed to the development of this category see in it an essential hermeneutical and practical significance. As already indicated, this option is a tangible commitment to perceive society from the perspective of existential situation of the poor and weak, and also an effort in the common struggle in favor of their emancipation.

Due to the fact that at the heart of the option for the poor lies the experience of God in the context of the drama of poverty in the modern world, including a desire to continue the long tradition of Christians caring for the poor, the option for the poor may serve as a sign of the credibility of the Church and Christianity. It is in such an understanding that we study this classical concept in fundamental theology (1 Peter 3:15). This thesis seems to be right at least for four major reasons.

First, the option for the poor confronts one of the major problems afflicting the contemporary world. Poverty is an empirical and universal fact that has an undeniable impact on the lives of individuals and entire societies. Thus, the various forms of poverty have a specific place in theology. The experience of poverty creates a specific context, one that introduces basic truths about God or can raise doubts about faith in God. On the other hand, actions undertaken by the Church make it possible to link faith declarations with the lives of specific people and various aspects of life. This fact can be particularly important in the process of authenticating the revelation of Christianity and the Church, for it allows us to see the real relationship between

¹⁴ A. PIETRZAK, *Opcja*, 141-175; I. ELLACURIA, *Pobres*, 1054-1057.

revelation and the needs inherent in people, including society and culture they create.

Second, from a Christian point of view, there is discord between impoverishment and different types of social rejection and God's plan of salvation. This discord requires the disciples of Jesus Christ and His Church (for the sake of its credibility) to take a stance in accord with revelation. God created man in his image and likeness and in this way made him his child. Man is given special dignity and invited to participate in the mystery of the love of the divine life. God gave him the gift of life and put him in charge of the world, in this way making him a participant in the development and improvement of the work of creation. Man is given the ability to build life in society based on love and unity, cooperation and participation, justice and peace. Man has attained a special dignity and rights mostly through Jesus Christ, thanks to whom God created and redeemed all of creation.

Third, the poor and poverty have an important place in Jesus Christ's salvific mission. By completing the mission entrusted to him, Jesus became man. From the time of his birth, He lived as a poor man. Among the social groups He interacted and worked with were the poor and people from the then social margins. They were also the group that followed Him, and an attitude of being free and detached from variety of goods (evangelical poverty) was a condition for becoming His disciple. Although Jesus' main message of the Kingdom of God was directed to everyone, yet in a special way He was close to the poor and weak, the people he went to most often. They were the ones, who first heard Him preaching the Good News, and He told them that being the victims of rejection and contempt, they are blessed and have a special place in the Kingdom of God. The proclamation of the Gospel to the poor was for Jesus one of the signs of His credibility as being the expected Messiah. The attitude of Jesus towards the poor met a revelatory function, *i.e.*, He showed the essence of God the merciful Father who graciously saves those who need Him. Specific place of the poor in the life of Jesus reveals a unique ethos emerging from His teaching, which implies rules of interpersonal relationships and determines the value of man-made goods.

Fourth, the community founded by Jesus Christ is made visible in history through realization of His intentions to each other, *i.e.*, a continuation of the work He begun by proclaiming the Good News until the fullness of time. Therefore, in fundamental ecclesiology, enhancing its current argument, we can talk about the criteria of the identity and authenticity of the ecclesial community's endeavoring to fulfill Christ's mission. Consequently, it can be argued that the identity of Christian communities depends on the fact, how

much of their life space they are ready to share with the poor. In this way, the Church through its option for the poor is made present and authentic in history as a community, which follows Jesus, and it becomes a visible sacrament, a sign of God's presence in the lives of people and society.

From the perspective of fundamental theology elucidated by semiotics' insights, any effort aimed at helping the poor is a sign – a collection of things, events and phenomena in social and ecclesial life (*signifié*) guiding people to Christ (*signifiant*), who shows the poor their dignity, supporting them in their efforts to be liberated, and leads them to unity with God and other people by living in evangelical poverty. This is a sign of credibility addressed to modern man and the society and community that he or she creates and claims to be “Christ-like.” It is the Church that sends this sign to people through various code-signs bearing anthropological, social, cultural, ethical and theological characteristics, situated in the context of contemporary social issues. Consequently, working for the poor the Church fulfils its mission by proclaiming the Good News of Jesus Christ. In this way, the Church comes true as community of Christ revealing the significance and meaning of salvation in Jesus Christ in the life of individuals and society, thus becoming the sign of Christ living in the Church today. This sign should be in reference to all other arguments functioning in current fundamental theology and, above all, to the person of Jesus Christ, acquiring in this fashion importance and strength for its credibility.

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The discussed issues, though not exhaust the topic of the preferential option for the poor, signal some key elements that compose it. Without a doubt, this category is a choice associated with the task to fulfill the evangelizing mission, and accepts everyone with open arms. However, it does not follow ephemeral fashion trends and stays away from ideological intrigue. Its implementation is of major importance for the promotion a social life based on human dignity. Through the preferential option for the poor, the disciples and missionaries of Jesus Christ fulfilling His Last Will, become a positive example and an important voice in verifying and challenging the “values”, by which people and systems generate poverty and the poor are functioning.

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OPCJA NA RZECZ UBOGICH I WIARYGODNOŚĆ KOŚCIOŁA

S t r e s z c z e n i e

Kategoria opcji na rzecz ubogich powstała w Ameryce Łacińskiej na przełomie lat sześćdziesiątych i siedemdziesiątych XX wieku jako owoc audytu wiary, osobistego, wspólnotowego i eklezjalnego życia. Artykuł przedstawia jej istotę i związek z zagadnieniem wiarygodności. Część pierwsza odpowiada na pytanie: co to jest preferencyjna opcja na rzecz ubogich? W części drugiej omawia się miejsce ubogich w Bożym planie zbawienia i misji Kościoła. W części ostatniej autor wskazuje na związek opcji na rzecz ubogich z wiarygodnością Kościoła. Doświadczenie Boga w kontekście ubóstwa i niesprawiedliwości współczesnego świata sprawia, że opcja na rzecz ubogich może pełnić rolę znaku wiarygodności Kościoła i chrześcijaństwa.

Słowa kluczowe: wiarygodność; ubodzy; ubóstwo; preferencyjna opcja na rzecz ubogich; Kościół ubogi; CELAM; Kościół w Ameryce Łacińskiej; teologia latynoamerykańska.