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We often hear and use the term "preferred option for the poor." Like many expressions, it is a phrase that gets tossed around without a clear understanding of what it really means. The US Catholic Conference of Bishops describe it as: The primary purpose of this special commitment to the poor is to enable them to become active participants in the life of society. It is to enable all persons to share in and contribute to the common good. The "option for the poor," therefore, is not an adversarial slogan that pits one group or class against another. Rather it states that the deprivation and powerlessness of the poor wounds the whole community. The extent of their suffering is a measure of how far we are from being a true community of persons. These wounds will be healed only by greater solidarity with the poor and among the poor themselves.[1]

The concept is also reflected in Catholic Canon Law which states, "The Christian faithful are also obliged to promote social justice and, mindful of the precept of the Lord, to assist the poor."[2]

It is an interesting statement. I am not sure how much the poor would agree with it or how much the rest of us understand it.

It has been almost 130 years since Pope Leo XIII wrote Rerum Novarum – "Of New Things." Pope Leo wrote about how the state should play a key role in connecting, as he described it "public well-being and private prosperity."[3] This idea later became known as promoting the Common Good. This idea of

[1] United States Catholic Bishops. *Economic Justice for All: Pastoral Letter on Catholic Social Teaching and the U.S. Economy* . 1986, www.usccb.org/upload/economic_justice_for_all.pdf

[2] "Code of Canon Law: Text - IntraText CT." *Text*, www.intratext.com/IXT/ENG0017/_PT.HTM.

[3] Pius, Leo. *Rerum Novarum*. Ned. Katholieke Arbeidersbeweging, 1949

the dignity and value of each human person is perhaps one of the most important features in Catholic Social Teachings. For years Popes and theologians have written it about. There are thousands upon thousands of dissertations written on one aspect or another. Many Catholic organizations that work on social justice use the expression "preferred option for the poor" or some form of it in their mission statement.

In today's political arena you often hear Catholic elected officials from both sides of the aisle talk about how their policies reflect Catholic Social teachings and the preferred option for the poor. You have our previous Speaker of the House, Paul Ryan and our current Speaker, Nancy Pelosi both claiming their policies and legislative agendas were formed by the principles of Catholic Social Teaching. It is often part of debates regarding programs for the poor such as food stamps, health care and more. It is hard to imagine that two visions for America that are so opposite and opposed to each other can both claim a genesis in Catholic Social Teachings. But that is where we are today. The question is how did we get here? One would think that after 120 years, or maybe even 2000 years, we would have a firm grasp on the what, the how, and the why of being in solidarity with the poor and marginalized.

Fr. Gustavo Gutierrez O.P., one of the founders of liberation theology, put it very succinctly when he said: "To make an option for the poor, is to make an option for Jesus."[4] In an interview with *America* magazine he said: "I am firmly convinced that poverty—this sub-human condition in which the majority of humanity lives today—is more than a social issue. Poverty poses a major challenge to every Christian conscience and therefore to theology as well."[5] The question that Gutierrez raises, and we all should reflect on, is which part of our theology is challenged by poverty?

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[4] Dear, John. "Gustavo Gutierrez and the Preferential Option for the Poor." *National Catholic Reporter*, 8 Nov. 2011, www.ncronline.org/blogs/road-peace/gustavo-gutierrez-and-preferential-option-poor.

[5] Hartnett, Daniel. "Remembering the Poor: An Interview with Gustavo Gutierrez." *American Magazine*, 3 Feb. 2003.

Fr. Gutierrez's suggestion that issues like poverty are as deeply rooted in our theology as they are in our politics is not a new concept. A little over 50 years ago a man named Lynn White gave a lecture at the American Association for the Advancement of Science titled "The Historical Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis." White was neither a theologian nor a scientist; he was a historian. Shortly after his lecture, White's article appeared in Science magazine. White's lecture and follow-up article ignited a firestorm of controversy. He argued that because our Christian theology is based on the idea of dominion over creation, it is essentially exploitative of the natural world. Human ecology is deeply conditioned by beliefs about our nature and destiny – that is, by "religion." White theorized that Christianity established the dualism of humans and nature, and by doing so also insisted that God permitted humans to exploit nature for their needs.

In his lecture, White argued that the environmental crisis was not just a result of technological advances. Rather, our environmental crisis is first and foremost the product of our Western worldview. He theorized that the ecological problem is fundamentally a theological or ideological problem. It is a question of how we see ourselves in relation to all of God's beautiful and wondrous creation. We view creation through the perspective of how creation can serve us. How can creation make my life simpler, easier, better? Creation is a product of our ideas, we are not a product of creation. These ideas center around what humans are, what the Earth and creation is, and what role each plays. White described it as: "what people do about their ecology depends on what they think about themselves in relation to things around them."

That idea can just as easily be transferred to the concept of 'Preferred Option for the Poor.' What we do for the poor depends on what we think about ourselves in relation to the poor. Until we "think about fundamentals," "clarify our thinking," "rethink our axioms," White said, we will not adequately address our environmental crisis. White concluded that our theology about nature must change. We must abandon our anthropocentrism, our idea that the Earth was created and

should be viewed solely from the human perspective. A belief that allows us to interpret the world in terms of human values and experiences and grants us the right to use Earth for our slightest whim.[6]

White is neither the first nor the last to connect our theology with the destruction of creation. The environmentalist and founder of the Sierra Club, John Muir contested the Christian concept of human dominion over natural resources. While known primarily as an environmentalist, Muir was a very religious and spiritual person. While most Christian thought in Muir's time was centered on anthropocentrism and the belief that Genesis taught that God gave man dominion over all creatures, Muir subscribed to a different theology. He saw the spirit in everything natural. Muir wrote: "Most people are on the world, not in it — have no conscious sympathy or relationship to anything about them — undiffused, separate, and rigidly alone like marbles of polished stone, touching but separate."[7] Again with the poor it is the same we are not part of the poor we are separate from the economically poor. We may be More than willing to bring a basket of food, make a donation or write a letter to our legislator--all very important actions, but still but rather we are separate (from what or whom?) More recently, the Lutheran eco-theologian H. Paul Santmire in his book, The Travail of Nature, challenged what he felt was the current religious view that we should not be concerned with the natural world, just salvation. Santmire describes this as the belief that God is a being separate from the world.[8]

The premise of White, Muir and Santmire about the ecological crisis being a theological issue could just as easily be applied to the poor and marginalized. St Francis of Assisi is credited with saying "If you have men who will exclude any of God's

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[6] White, Lynn. "The Historical Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis." Science, New Series, vol. 155, no. 3767, 10 Mar. 1967, pp. 1203–1207.

[7] Muir, John, and Linnie M. Wolfe. John of the Mountains the Unpubl. Journals of John Muir. Repr. Services Corp., 1991.

[8] Santmire, H. Paul. The Travail of Nature: the Ambiguous Ecological Promise of Christian Theology. Fortress Press, 1985.

creatures from the shelter of compassion and pity, you will have men who will deal likewise with their fellow men."[9] St. Francis did not separate the spiritual world from the material world. St. Francis taught that we have to live in relations of solidarity with all creation. Br. Keith Warner OFM, Director of Education and Action Research at Santa Clara University, describes it this way: "Francis is the patron of those who cultivate ecological consciousness, but that means a lot more than being the patron of environmental educators. His example really points to a mystical or a spiritual vision for all of the created world as brother and sister, as he describes in his "Canticle of the Creatures."[10] Sr. Ilia Delio OSF often writes about the connection, the relationship that Francis had with all creation. In her book A Franciscan View of Creation, she talks about the link between creation and incarnation. She says: "Francis' respect for creation was not a duty or obligation but arose out of an inner love by which creation and the source of creation were intimately united… "[11] Francis saw himself as part of creation, as being in relationship with creation, including the human family, but not only humans, and not having dominion over creation or even stewardship of creation. Rather than viewing creation from anthropocentrism, or human-centered, St. Francis saw creation as "biocentrism," that is, life-centered.

Since the time White first wrote his article our theology has somewhat evolved. We have moved away from the concept that we have domination over creation. Today most of us use the term "steward" of creation. We believe that we have to be good stewards of creation. We are protectors of creation. But stewardship falls short of Francis of Assisi's believe in relationship, in which humans are not over the created world as caretakers, but are in a familial relationship with all creation.

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[9] "The Church Fathers and Mothers." *Catholic Climate Covenant*, catholicclimatecovenant.org/teachings/church-fathers-and-mothers.

[10] "St. Francis: Patron of Ecology." *USCatholic.org*, Apr. 2010, www.uscatholic.org/church/2010/09/st-francis-patron-ecology.

[11] A Franciscan View of Creation: Learning to Live in a Sacramental World." A Franciscan View of Creation: Learning to Live in a Sacramental World, by Ilia Delio, Franciscan Institute, St. Bonaventure University, 2003, pp. 14–14.

Even the dominionist believes that while God put the creatures and resources on Earth for our use and benefit we must be judicious and good stewards.

What does any of this have to do with the Preferred Option for the Poor? In a 2012 article in *Catholic Moral Theology, SHOULD WE HAVE A PREFERENTIAL OPTION FOR THE RICH?,* Dr. Charles Camosy, an Associate Professor of Theological and Social Ethics at Fordham University, wrote: We should, of course, be concerned with the flourishing of the poor. But flourishing in this life is only of proximate value, isn't it? Our ultimate goal is salvation and ultimate union with God. And many of the rich among us–and many of us (who are surely rich by any reasonable standard), period–have put our salvation in serious danger. We abandon the poor in buying luxuries we don't need. We abandon them in supporting usurious policies. We haplessly attempt to serve two masters…despite our true Master telling us that this is impossible. … It is important, even essential, to have a preferential option for the poor. But isn't this often connected with having a preferential option for the rich–many of whom, if we take Jesus seriously, imperil their own salvation?[12]

What I hear Dr. Camosy saying in this statement is that the preferred option for the poor is about helping the poor only insofar as it helps the poor get to Heaven. He also suggests that by not showing a preferential option for the poor we are putting our own salvation in danger. So in effect, the option for the poor is not really about the poor and marginalized; it is about helping me get to Heaven. Helping the poor is good only if it is part of the theology of helping them gain salvation and enter into Heaven. It is a theology that has been used to justify a great many atrocities within our church like slavery and the Doctrine of Discovery. What Camosy writes pretty much sums up most of our belief system. We are here only for the sole purpose of

[12] Camosy, Charles. "Should We Have a Preferential Option for the Rich?" *Catholic Moral Theology*, 2012.

getting to Heaven. Anything and everything we do is good only if it serves the purpose of getting us to Heaven.

In the 13th century there were two theologians considered to be among the greatest thinkers and leading Christian theologians, St Thomas Aquinas and St Bonaventure. They were contemporaries and even attended the University of Paris together. St. Thomas Aquinas taught that non-rational creatures do not have moral value. He believed that human destiny involves an escape from the world of material change. Aquinas believed that the world was created by God as an ordered and unique whole, displaying its beauty as well as the beauty of the Creator, and which was bequeathed to man that he may have dominion over it. While Aquinas believed that it is morally wrong to be cruel to animals, his rationale was that such cruelty would make it easier for a person to develop a moral character in which they would be more inclined to express cruelty to human beings, which leads to greater separation from God. Aquinas believed that created things are made by God for the sole purpose of leading us to God.

St. Bonaventure on the other hand, drawing from the life of St Francis, developed a theology of creation. Bonaventure believed creation is relationship. He did not believe that God's creation was there to serve humanity. Bonaventure described the created universe as the fountain fullness of God's expressed being. As God is expressed in creation, creation in turn expresses the creator.

Aquinas and Bonaventure had an ongoing discussion, which started with the question "Was Mary conceived without sin?" Aquinas argued if Mary were conceived without sin, then she would not need a redeemer. He went on to argue that Jesus came as a healer and a redeemer. Without original sin, there would be no need for a healer. Bonaventure argued that Jesus' arrival can't be limited to his role in saving creation from sin because God's decision to become incarnate precedes creation itself.[13]

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[13] Benedict, Pope. "General Audience." *General Audience of 7 July 2010: John Duns Scotus | BENEDICT XVI*, 7 July 2010, w2.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/audiences/2010/documents/hf_ben-xvi_aud_20100707.html.

Another Franciscan theologian, Blessed John Duns Scotus said The Incarnation of the Son of God is the *very reason for the whole Creation*. To think that God would have given up such a task had Adam not sinned would be quite unreasonable! I say, therefore, that the fall was not the cause of Christ's predestination and that if no one had fallen, neither the angel nor man in this hypothesis Christ would still have been predestined in the same way.[14]

While many have downplayed the difference between the philosophies of these two brilliant theologians, Aquinas and Bonaventure, they present completely different visions of Christianity. Bonaventure and Duns Scotus believed that the purpose of the Incarnation was love, not sin.

Richard Rohr OFM states: "Without some form of incarnation, God remains essentially separate from us and from all of creation. God, who is Infinite Love, incarnates that love as the universe itself."[15] If the Word became Flesh in reaction to original sin then it could not have been part of the original plan for creation. Franciscan spirituality teaches that creation is the outpouring of God's love into the universe. Creation reveals to us God's love for us and God's beauty. And faith in a loving God has implications for the Incarnation and salvation history. The Word of God became incarnate not because the world is full of sin, but in order to transform the world into a communion of love centered in Christ. St Francis believed more in the theology of the Incarnation and the Resurrection.

Aquinas' view evolved from the prevalent theology around substitutionary atonement. The idea that the Cross was necessary and required as an atonement for original sin. There are many different variations of the atonement theology. Dr. Elizabeth Johnson's recent book, *Creation and the Cross: The*

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[14] "Holy Men and Women from the Middle Ages and Beyond." *Holy Men and Women from the Middle Ages and Beyond*, by POPE BENEDICT, Ignatius, 2012, pp. 88–88.

[15] Rohr, Richard. "Incarnation." Center for Action and Contemplation, 17 Jan. 2018, cac.org/incarnation-2018-01-25/.

Mercy of God for a Planet in Peril, does an excellent job explaining the various theories. As she puts it: "people equated redemption with the pardon of sins said to be gained by Jesus' death." She goes on to say: "It is hard to take cosmic redemption seriously if redemption is only about forgiveness of human sin. How did this come about?"[16] The atonement theories range from the early Christian theology sometimes known as the ransom theory of atonement. Credit is mostly given to the 3rd century Christian scholar and Theologian Origen of Alexandria. He believed that because we, somewhere, at some point, committed original sin, Satan had claim to our soul and God needed to buy our souls back through the ransom of Jesus. While there were several variations, this was the common belief for the first thousand years or so of our church. In the 11th century, St. Anselm wrote his "Cur Deus Homo" in which he proposed the satisfaction theory of atonement.[17] As the Evangelical pastor and author R. C. Sproul put it: God satisfied the demands of His righteousness by giving to us a Substitute who stands in our place, offering that satisfaction for us." He continues: "He pays the penalty for us that is due our sins. We are debtors who cannot possibly pay the moral debt that we have incurred by our offense against the righteousness of God, and God's wrath is satisfied and propitiated by the perfect sacrifice that Christ makes on our behalf.[18]

So Anselm moves away from the idea that satan needed to be satisfied to a theory that God was so offended that only a sacrifice equal to God would satisfy.

Dr Johnson's book really goes into depth on the issues surrounding substitutionary atonement theology. I will just scratch the surface. In Deuteronomy 5 it says that God will only punish up to the third or fourth generation for the sins committed by a parent. In Ezekiel 18 it says: "The one who sins

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[16] JOHNSON, ELIZABETH A. *CREATION AND THE CROSS: the Mercy of God for a Planet in Peril*. ORBIS, 2019.

[17] Anselm, St. *Cur Deus Homo?* David Nutt, 1914.

[18] Sproul, R.C. "God Is Satisfied." *Ligonier Ministries*, 5 July 2017, www.ligonier.org/blog/god-satisfied/.

is the one who will die. The child will not share the guilt of the parent, nor will the parent share the guilt of the child."[19] So in effect, if God is demanding satisfaction, retribution for something that happened 200 or 300 hundred generations ago, God is violating God's own laws. Or as Duns Scotus said: "The Incarnation of the Son of God is the *very reason for the whole Creation*. To think that God would have given up such a task had Adam not sinned would be quite unreasonable!"[20]

You at this point might be asking yourself what does any of this have to do with the preferred option for the poor? But remember at the start I mentioned Fr. Gutierrez saying: "Poverty poses a major challenge to every Christian conscience and therefore to theology as well." We too often view preferred option for the poor from a policy or legislative perspective. If we are passing a budget or funding programs, we must insure that the poor and marginalized are cared for. It is important to do that just as it is important to continue the charitable work in which we are all engaged. But as Buckminster Fuller said: "In order to change an existing paradigm you do not struggle to try and change the problematic model. You create a new model and make the old one obsolete."

Well if St Francis, Scotus, and Bonaventure were right that the Incarnation would have happened regardless of sin then we have to ask; what was the purpose of the Incarnation? If it wasn't to pay some perceived debt that God felt was owed, what then? St. Angela of Foligno, a 13th century Franciscan mystic, said: My soul in an excess of wonder cried out: 'This world is pregnant with God!' Wherefore I understood how small is the whole of creation- that is, what is on this side and what is beyond the sea, the abyss, the sea itself, and everything else- but the power of God fills it all to overflowing.[21]

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[19] Johnson, Elizabeth. 2019.

[20] Benedict, Pope. 2012.

[21] LaChance, Paul. Angela of Foligno: Complete Works. Paulist Press, 1993.

Imagine all creation pregnant with God.

In Aquinas' view, saving the soul is what is critical and important. It is all that matters. We are here to live, die, and maybe if we follow the right path, go to Heaven. Creation is just about helping us go somewhere else. Bonaventure and Scotus theology is centered on the incarnation, God becoming man and in doing so, we become co-creators with God in building the kingdom of Heaven here on Earth. They are two very different theologies; one presents a vision as we often say "I hope to go to Heaven." In the other, we are connected through God to all of creation and with God we are co-creators of the Kingdom. Or as the author, activist and Minister Brian Mclaren often asks, "Do we believe Jesus came with an evacuation plan or a building plan?" So we need to think and reflect on the theology that needs to change, the paradigm, that needs to shift before we can honestly address the issues around the poor and marginalized. If we are helping poor and marginalized people so we can get to heaven, or maybe it will help the poor get to Heaven, not so we can create heaven here on Earth, we are kind of missing the message. Many of our actions are centered around the belief that Jesus rose from the dead then was taken to Heaven until that day when he comes again to create the kingdom on Earth. In Hebrews 13:5 it says "I will never leave you" and in Matthew 28:20 Jesus says: "I am with you always, to the end of the age." So if Jesus never left us and is always with us why are we sitting around waiting for the return to build the kingdom? to embrace, to act in solidarity with, people made poor by systems and policies?

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