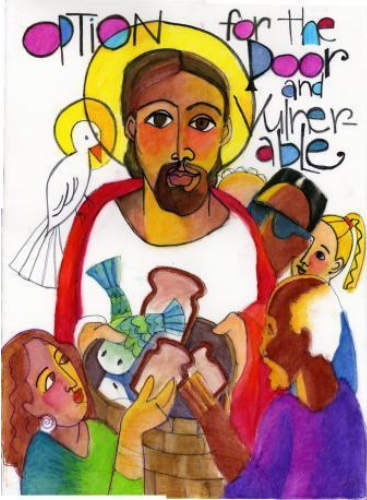




Option for the Poor and Vulnerable *Principle IV*

We continue our summer series on Catholic Social Teaching by looking at the fourth principle: Option for the Poor and Vulnerable.

Throughout Sacred Scripture, it is abundantly clear that God has a deep love for the poor. Deuteronomy 15:11 states, *"The land will never lack for needy persons; that is why I command you: 'Open your hand freely to your poor and to your needy kin in your land.'"* And in the psalms, we read, *"This poor one cried out and the Lord heard, and from all distress saved him."* (Ps. 34:7)

In the New Testament, we have the well-known passage from the Judgment of Nations. The nations are brought before the Son of Man, who separates the sheep from the goats. The sheep, placed on his right, provided for the basic needs of the least of Jesus' brothers, i.e., food, drink, clothing, etc. (Mt. 25:31-40). The goats, on the other hand, failed to do so. Placed on Jesus' left, they go off to eternal punishment (Mt. 25:46).

Attention to the poor has been an essential part of the Church's mission since the beginning. For example, after the Council of Jerusalem in Acts 15, James, Cephas, and John gave Paul their right hands in partnership in bringing the gospel to the Gentiles. Paul adds, *"Only we were to be mindful of the poor, which is the very thing I was eager to do."* (Gal. 2:10)

In this light, Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI said that exercise of charity is not optional, but rather one of the Church's *essential* activities. Specifically, he said, "The Church cannot neglect the service of charity any more than she can neglect the Sacraments and the Word." (*Deus Caritas Est*, 22) For Benedict, service to the poor is as essential as administering the sacraments and preaching the gospel. In fact, it *is* preaching the gospel, i.e., the gospel of charity.

Mother Teresa, for her part, is known for her deep love for the poor. She saw in the poor "Jesus in his most distressing disguise." This saintly little servant once said you could summarize the gospel in five words, "You-did-it-to-me."

For Mother Teresa, holiness meant keeping “Jesus in the Eucharist” and “Jesus in the poor” together. Her love for Jesus in the Eucharist was “carried over” into her service for the poor. Beautifully, she once remarked, “I have opportunity to be with Jesus 24 hours a day.” Mother was with Jesus in the pew at Mass, in Eucharistic Adoration, in the hospital, and in the slums. What a gift – to see Christ in all and to make His love present to all!

Additionally, in speaking about the poor, whom do we mean? There are, of course, the material poor. This includes, but not limited to, unborn children, persons with disabilities, the elderly, the terminally ill, immigrants, victims of injustice and oppressions, and/or those struggling just to get by.

Furthermore, St. John Paul II remarked that the Church’s preferential option for the poor goes beyond material poverty. Specifically, he says, “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.” (*Centesimus Annus*, 57) Cultural poverty is when society ignores or abuses the weak and vulnerable, while spiritual poverty is an attitude of independence, i.e., the attempt to live as if God does not exist or He is irrelevant to our lives.

Practically, God calls us to address both the immediate needs of the poor (the person before us), as well as the systemic problems that cause poverty. We are called not only to give directly to the poor (both financially and personally), but also to support public policy that helps improve their lives.

In short, the principle of serving the poor is very challenging. However, Pope Francis reminds us, “Among our tasks as witnesses to the love of Christ is that of giving a voice to the cry of the poor.” (Address to the Archbishop of Canterbury, 06/14/13)

~St. Thérèse, pray for us!



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