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## The 'Messiah of the Poor' --- Preferential Protection of the Vulnerable

In the Gospel according to Luke, the birth of Jesus is not an event witnessed by the powerful and the advantaged. On the contrary, the presence of shepherds is symbolic of the poor and the outcasts as the first to praise and glorify God. (Lk. 2:8-20)

The infancy narratives in Matthew and Luke can be viewed as "the gospels in miniature. Thus, John Shea has observed that "[t]he stories of the birth of Jesus contain the seeds of his full blown life." Besides drawing allusions to imagery and events from the Jewish scriptures, the infancy narratives also foreshadow events in the future public life of Jesus.

Luke's nativity scene echoes a motif which has been artistically woven into the fabric of his gospel - the theme of mercy and forgiveness. As the gospel of mercy and forgiveness, a significant portion of the Lucan portrait of Jesus is devoted to Jesus' teaching on the care of the poor and on the responsible use of wealth.

Jesus' inaugural sermon in his hometown synagogue at Nazareth illustrates this theme in a compelling manner. (Lk. 4:16-22) This defining act at the beginning of Jesus' public life occurs with his opening of the scroll from the prophet Isaiah. (Is. 61:1-2) Jesus reads: "*The spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring glad tidings to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim liberty to captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, and to proclaim a year acceptable to the Lord.*" (Luke 4: 18-19)

In this passage, Jesus identifies himself as the

Spirit-filled Isaian servant who stands in the great prophetic tradition of Israel. The version from Isaiah speaks of the anointed One --- the Messiah.

Then, in an electrifying moment, Jesus proclaims to those assembled, "*Today this scripture passage is fulfilled in your hearing.*" (Lk. 4:21) For Luke, Jesus in his person and in his ministry discloses the definitive and irrevocable inbreaking of the saving God in history.

The Isaiah text is related to the proclamation of the Jubilee practice found in the Book of Leviticus (25: 8-17). The Jubilee year closed a cycle of fifty years and established a period of freedom, liberation, and release.

In his apostolic letter, *On the Coming of the Third Millennium (Tertio Millennio Adveniente, 1994)*, Pope John Paul II developed the themes of the Jubilee year. While conceding that the prescriptions of the practice might have "largely remained as ideals," he interpreted them to be "*a propheta futuri* insofar as they foretold the freedom which would be won by the coming Messiah." (TMA n. 13) The laws of jubilee were a foretelling of the redemption of freedom in the advent of the Christ. The Holy Father described the jubilee norms as an inchoate ground of *social doctrine* "which would then more clearly develop beginning with the New Testament." His analysis also infers that the social doctrine of the Catholic Church is "rooted in the tradition of the jubilee year." (TMA n.13)

In the context of the biblical jubilee, Pope John

*The Catholic Conference of KY (CCK) is an agency of the Catholic Bishops, established in 1983. It speaks for the Church in matters of public policy, serves as liaison to government and the legislature, and coordinates communications and activities between the church and secular agencies. There are 388,000 Catholics in the Commonwealth. The Bishops of the four dioceses of KY constitute CCK's Board of Directors.*

Paul II meditated on the implications of Jesus' vision of his ministry in what some exegetes have called the "Nazareth Manifesto" of Jesus in Luke 4:16-30. He noted that the Jubilee "characterizes all the activity of Jesus." (TMA n. 11) He declared: "*The words and deeds of Jesus thus represent the fulfillment of the whole tradition of Jubilees in the Old Testament.*" (TMA n. 12) In connection with the "day of salvation," the biblical jubilees "*point to this time and refer to the Messianic mission of Christ, who came as the one 'anointed' by the Holy Spirit, the one 'sent by the Father.'*" (TMA n. 11)

In enumerating several reasons for the Jubilee practice, the Pope focused on the singular concern for justice --- "a jubilee year had to be proclaimed, to assist those in need." (TMA n.13) He noted: "*Justice, according to the Law of Israel consisted above all in the protection of the weak ...*"

The thought of Pope John Paul II on the theme of the biblical jubilee and social justice reflected in *Tertio Millennio Adveniente* has been summed up in the recently issued *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church* (2004). The Compendium, published by the Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, treats the concept of the biblical jubilee in the opening chapter --- "God's Plan of Love for Humanity." (CSDC nn. 24-25) The theological rationale of the biblical foundation of the jubilee norms is set forth in the following passage:

This legislation is designed to ensure that the salvific event of the Exodus and fidelity to the Covenant represents not only the founding of Israel's social, political and economic life, but also the principle for dealing with questions concerning economic poverty and social injustices. This principle is invoked in order to transform, continuously from within, the life of the people of the Covenant, so that this life will correspond to God's plan. To eliminate the discrimination and economic inequalities caused by socio-economic changes, every seven years the memory of the Exodus and the Covenant are translated into social and juridical terms, in order to bring the

concepts of property, debts, loans and goods back to their deepest meaning. (CSDC n. 24)

The Compendium identifies the precepts of the sabbatical and jubilee years as "*a kind of social doctrine in miniature.*" (CSDC n. 25)

In their major pastoral letter *Economic Justice for All* (1986), the National Conference of Catholic Bishops has applied Church social teaching to the economy of the United States. Within the pastoral's survey of biblical perspectives on justice, the bishops highlight the first public utterance of Jesus, the programmatic vision on his messianic mission --- "*The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor.*" (EJ n.48)

*Economic Justice for All* judges that the contemporary social principle of "*the preferential option for the poor*" rests on solid scriptural grounds. (EJ n.52) In this section, the pastoral letter points out that the example of Jesus lays down several challenges to the contemporary Church:

It imposes a prophetic mandate to speak for those who have no one to speak for them, to be a defender of the defenseless, who in biblical terms are poor. It demands a compassionate vision that enables the Church to see things from the side of the poor and powerless and to assess lifestyle, policies, and social institutions in terms of their impact on the poor. It summons the Church also to be an instrument in assisting people to experience the liberating power of God in their own lives so that they may respond to the Gospel in freedom and dignity. ...

The final challenge is the most radical, for it calls "for an emptying of self, both individually and corporately, that allows the Church to experience the power of God in the midst of poverty and powerlessness." (EJ n. 52)

Although once a phrase that at times had provoked suspicion and controversy, the "*option for the poor*" has moved into the mainstream of Catholic social teaching.

In *On Social Concern (Sollicitudo Rei Socialis)*, 1987) Pope John Paul II discussed "the *option or love of preference* for the poor." He

spells out the implications of the principle and affirms that the concept does encompass the social responsibilities of Catholics. Accordingly, the principle applies to "our manner of living, and to the logical decisions to be made concerning the ownership and use of goods." (SRS n.42)

A year earlier, the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith had issued an *Instruction on Christian Freedom and Liberation (Libertatis Conscientia, 1986)*. The CDF document clarified certain doctrinal aspects pertaining to liberation theology; a major section is entitled "A Love of Preference for the Poor." (LC nn. 66-70)

Drawing on a reference to Luke 4:18, the 1986 CDF instruction states that "Christ was foretold by the prophets as the Messiah of the poor ..." (LC n. 66) In this context the title has been associated with the "poor of Yahweh." However, the next section explores the relationship of Jesus to the poor. It sums up the matter with the following insight --- "the beatitude of poverty which He proclaimed can never signify that Christians are permitted to ignore the poor who lack what is necessary for human life in this world." (LC n.67)

The Vatican instruction on freedom and liberation linked love for the poor with an affirmation of human dignity, an affirmation that men and women are worth more for *what they are than for what they have*. Thus, the Church witnesses to solidarity with persons who do not count because of their rejection or marginalization by society. (LC n. 68)

In his centenary encyclical *Centesimus Annus (On the Hundredth Anniversary of Rerum Novarum, 1991)* Pope John Paul II had analyzed the principle of "*the preferential option of the poor*" from a historical perspective. The Holy Father categorized *Rerum Novarum (On the Condition of the Worker, 1891)*, the inaugural papal social encyclical of Leo XIII, as a testimony to the "preferential option for the poor." (CA n. 11)

In his own presentation on the concept, Pope John Paul II emphasized the need for an awareness that would correlate the credibility of the Church's social message with the "witness of actions." The "preferential option of the poor" originates from such awareness. Pope John Paul II explained that the

option for the poor in a broad sense also includes forms of poverty other than material poverty, namely, "cultural and spiritual poverty as well." (CA n. 57)

The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* formalized the Church's constant tradition summed up in the concept of "Love for the Poor." (CCC nn. 2443-2449). The Catechism cites a segment from the above-mentioned Vatican instruction on liberation: "... Hence, those who are oppressed by poverty are the object of *preferential love* on the part of the Church which, since her origin and in spite of the failings of many of her members, has not ceased to work for their relief, defense, and liberation through the numerous works of charity which remains indispensable always and everywhere." (CCC n. 2448. See LC n. 68)

Again, the *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church* calls for the principle of "*the preferential option for the poor*" to be reaffirmed "in all its force." It notes that the option should not only engage the lives of Christians in the exercise of Christian charity but also entails social responsibilities that apply to "our manner of living, and to the logical decisions to be made concerning the ownership and use of good." (CSDC n.182)

Moreover, the historical global context of the social question constitutes a summons to "embrace the immense multitudes of the hungry, the needy, the homeless, those without health care and, above all, those without hope for a better future." (CSDC n.182) In this regard, the Compendium makes reference to prior papal social teaching on global ethical obligations, especially in *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis* n.42, *Evangelium Vitae* n.32, *Tertio Millennio Adveniente* n. 51, and *Tertio Millennio Ineunte* nn. 49-50.

The Compendium views the *Church's love for the poor* as inspired "*by the Gospel of the Beatitudes, by the poverty of Jesus and by his attention to the poor.*" The focus of that option extends beyond the concerns of material poverty to "*numerous forms of cultural and religious poverty* (CCC n.2444)." (CSDC n.184.)

By the way, the Liberty Bell is inscribed with a verse from the Book of Leviticus --- "*Proclaim liberty in the land.*" (Lev. 25:10)

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