

## THE POOR Embraced by God's Plan for Justice and Compassion - Part I

### 1. Introduction

Throughout Church tradition, there has been a strong emphasis on caring for the poor and marginalised in society. Jesus himself taught that helping the poor is a central aspect of following him. The early Christian communities were known for their practice of sharing their resources and caring for those in need. The Church continues to prioritise this concern even today. This is reflected in the Church's teaching on social justice, which emphasises the importance of addressing systemic issues that contribute to poverty and inequality, as well as providing direct assistance to those who are struggling.

However, following the Second Vatican Council, there is a new way of understanding the poor in the Church. The poor are not just objects of charity for the wealthy. Theological reflection since the Council has sought to recover the hermeneutically privileged place of the poor in God's plan. This article therefore seeks to re-examine the place of the poor in contemporary Christian understanding. With this in mind, the article begins by looking briefly at the concept of the poor in the Bible. While analysing the significance of the poor in post-conciliar theological reflection, it also examines the notion of the 'option' for the poor in today's ecclesial context. Before highlighting some of the challenges of the option for the poor, it will also try to see how the teachings of Pope Francis could be useful in clarifying some of the issues related to it.

### 2. The Old Testament and the Poor

The poor is a privileged concept in the Judeo-Christian tradition. In the biblical tradition, the term has a broader meaning than the more common notion of depravity or the lack of basic material needs. Often the context in which it is used and the person to whom it is addressed determine its meaning. For example, in Luke's Gospel, Jesus says: "Blessed are you who are

poor, for yours is the kingdom of God" (Lk 6:20). In Matthew's Beatitudes, we find an additional qualification to this saying of Jesus: "Blessed are the *poor in spirit*, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven" (Mt 5:3). Although they seem similar, on closer examination we realise that the meaning of these expressions is not the same. The addition of 'in spirit' changes the meaning, both theologically and socially. This leads us to reflect briefly on how the Bible understands the poor.

Although poverty and the poor are important biblical and theological concepts today, they were not so in the early Jewish tradition. Poverty was by no means an ideal. In fact, in some places in the Bible, poverty was associated with wickedness. It was seen, particularly in the books of wisdom, as the mark of the lazy and the careless: "Lazy hands make for poverty, but diligent hands bring wealth" (Prov 10:4). Furthermore, the same tradition saw material prosperity as a sign of God's blessing or reward for a righteous life: "The righteous will flourish like a palm tree; they will grow like a cedar of Lebanon" (Ps 92:12).

With the passage of time, accompanied by mature reflection on their history and experiences, a change in perspective occurred. Scripture writers began to notice that many good people were among the poor: "Better the poor whose walk is blameless than the rich whose ways are perverse" (Prov 28:6). With this awareness came a growing consciousness of the rich man's obligation to help his poorer brethren (Lev 19:9-10). This insight into God's purposes brought "a holy reverence for misery." As a result, disrespect for the rights of the poor was seen as disrespect for God himself. Needless to say, it took a long time to come to this realisation.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> P.F. Mulhern, *Dedicated Poverty* (Staten Island: Alba House, 1972), 1

The Book of Psalms is one of the few texts in the Old Testament (OT) that privileges the poor in its treatment of them. In the Psalms, in fact, the poor appear everywhere, especially in individual prayers, laments, and thanksgivings. The variety of terms used by the Psalmist to designate the poor cannot go unnoticed. The most prominent of these is *anawim*. In a broad sense, the term refers to the person who suffers poverty and affliction, and puts his/her trust in the Lord. Some authors are of the opinion that it was the poor, especially the people of low social status who were exploited by the rulers and the powerful within the religious society of ancient Israel, who inspired the composition of the Psalms.

There are two divergent views among scholars on the subject of *anawim* in the Bible. One view is that in ancient Israel there were two groups of people with similar names (*anawim* and *aniyyim*) who fell under the category of the poor. While *aniyyim* were economically poor and socially oppressed, *anawim* belonged to the pious religious movement that emerged during the exile. The latter came from different social classes, economically poor and otherwise, and their distinguishing characteristic was to promote a religious attitude of humility and docility before God. These pious Jews led a humble and detached life, ready to accept suffering as submission to God's will. They adopted this attitude with serenity, looking forward to the hope of eschatological fulfilment. These people were active in the formation of the Psalms. In the Psalms, they used the Servant of Yahweh of Second Isaiah as a model for the poor. Thus, they gave rise to the spirituality of *anawim* in the biblical tradition. What happened in this process was that the truly poor (*aniyyim*) and their social and economic conditions receded into the background, and the "virtue" of the poor (*anawim*) and the spirituality of poverty came to the forefront.

But some, on the other hand, believe that in the OT tradition the terms *anawim* and *aniyyim* were synonyms, with no difference in meaning. That is, for them, *anawim* and *aniyyim* are two ancient linguistic or dialectical variants of the same original word. Consequently, they hold that *anawim* encompasses not only a spiritual attitude of humility and detachment, but also a social and economic situation of poverty or

destitution. From this perspective, the poor are humble and docile not because they accept poverty as a "virtue," but because they are not like their oppressors. They do not respond violently to their oppressors with an eye-for-an-eye attitude. Moreover, what the poor long for is not the reward of a tested virtue, but the restoration of a violated order. They are motivated by a universal hope shared by every human being who suffers poverty and oppression on earth.

A third group seeks to reconcile these divergent views of the biblical concept of *anawim* by affirming that the poor of the Psalms are persons who trust in God in the midst of their misery, suffering, and oppression, and who do not respond with violence to their aggressors. The sad experience of their misery leads them to find support and hope in their religious faith. This religious attitude, especially in the post-exilic period, became so synonymous with the concept of the poor that it seemed to eclipse the social and economic dimension (Zeph 2:3). Here we cannot help noticing that the over-emphasis on the religious attitude of humility has taken the sting out of it. It has blunted the seriousness of the concrete and existential suffering of the poor.<sup>2</sup>

Whatever the various schools of thought may say about the concept of the poor in the OT tradition, it is important to remember that Israel as a nation began its historical journey as an enslaved, poor, and oppressed people. For this reason, the Jewish creed reminds the people of Israel never to forget their formative years in Egypt:

My father was a wandering Aramean, and he went down into Egypt with a few people and lived there and became a great nation, powerful and numerous. But the Egyptians mistreated us and made us suffer, subjecting us to harsh labour. Then we cried out to the Lord, the God of our ancestors, and the Lord heard our voice and saw our misery, toil and oppression (Deut 26:5-7).

According to Lohfink, this creed, which refers to Israel's history of poverty, suffering, and

<sup>2</sup> Cf. E. Nardoni, *Rise up, O Judge: A Study of Justice in the Biblical World* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 2004), 126-27

liberation, is a confession of faith in the God who delivered the poor from bondage and led them to a land of freedom. It was an act of compassion on God's part. Here poverty and slavery are recognised as the product of human action. They are neither fate, nor the will of the gods, nor the result of people's personal failings. Pharaoh, as the symbolic figure of the social system, willed it and made it happen.<sup>3</sup> Given that most of the OT statements about the poor belong to the cultural context and linguistic formulation of the ancient Near East,<sup>4</sup> one would have expected a similar response from the God of Israel here. Following this pattern, we would have expected Yahweh to hear the cry of the poor in Egypt and come to their aid with immediate social relief or to resolve the problem through peaceful negotiation between the Israelites and Pharaoh.<sup>5</sup> But that is not what Yahweh did. He acted in a very different way from the deities of Israel's neighbours: "Yahweh's intervention does not aim, as do such acts of assistance elsewhere in the ancient Near East, to lighten the suffering while leaving the system intact or perhaps even aiding its renewed stabilization. *Instead, the poor are removed from the impoverishing situation.*"<sup>6</sup> In other words, in the face of suffering, God acts decisively, changing the course of Israel's history.

<sup>3</sup> N.F. Lohfink, *Option for the Poor: The Basic Principle of Liberation Theology in the Light of the Bible* (Berkeley: Bibal Press, 1987), 32.

<sup>4</sup> Indeed, Israel shared the social concern for the poor, the widow and the orphan common to the ancient Near East, particularly ancient Mesopotamia and Egypt. Cf. Nardoni, *Rise up, O Judge*, 42.

<sup>5</sup> Although the gods of Near Eastern religions cared for the poor, they ensured the eternal survival of social structures that contained inequalities. These structures were seen as part of the order of creation. The gods protected them. Their option for the poor was aimed at "stabilising the existing system." In other words, the aim of the Near Eastern ethics "is merely to level the extremes and to avoid unbearable hardships. It thus serves to prevent sudden explosions within society, revolutions that would upset the whole complex, and in this sense, it actually helps to maintain the systems that produce poverty." Lohfink, *Option for the Poor*, 25.

<sup>6</sup> Lohfink, *Option for the Poor*, 32 (emphasis added). See also J.S. Croatto, *Biblical Hermeneutics: Toward a Theory of Reading and the Production of Meaning* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1987); J.V. Pixley, *On Exodus: A Liberation Perspective* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1987).

Israel itself has been a victim of oppression and inequality at the hands of the powerful. The OT repeatedly reminds the Israelites of their harrowing history and warns them against exploitation and mistreatment of the poor and the stranger: "Do not oppress a foreigner; you yourselves know how it feels to be foreigners, because you were foreigners in Egypt" (Ex 23:9). They are invited to see in the face of the needy, especially in the face of a stranger, the memory of their suffering in Egypt. This memory should lead them to imitate God's compassion for them and to put it into practice in their dealings with others. While God's saving action in Egypt gave birth to Israel as a people with dignity, it also serves as a model for acting as God did on their behalf, especially in responding to the cry of the poor and oppressed. Concern for the poor is thus part of their identity as a people created and sustained by God.

We must not forget that the laws of Sinai originated in the events of liberation and are modelled after the spirit of a compassionate and redeeming God. The Covenant and the Decalogue must be read in this light.<sup>7</sup> One of the aims of the Covenant was to facilitate the transfer of the religious and ethical spirit that animated the Covenant norms to any new situation in which the people might find themselves. This spirit of the Covenant is used as a guide to answering the question: "What must a people do during the process of liberation and after it has been freed from oppression?"<sup>8</sup> It seems that the whole purpose of God's liberating action is to make a covenant with Israel and to establish the standards to be followed in order to be a free nation in his service. A new social order is envisaged: "According to this order, Yahweh intends that Israel be a nation of sisters and brothers in which there will be no more poor (Deut. 15:4)."<sup>9</sup> All members of the community are called to serve God and humanity. Here, service to God means acting according to the mind of their creator and liberator, i.e., living according to God's compassion, justice, and standard. In

<sup>7</sup> Cf. R. Latourelle, *Teologia della rivelazione* (Assisi: Cittadella, 1991), 398-402.

<sup>8</sup> Cf. Nardoni, *Rise up, O Judge*, 69.

<sup>9</sup> Lohfink, *Option for the Poor*, 37.

other words, Israel as a nation is invited to imitate God in its commitment to others, especially the poor.

We can conclude that God reveals himself in a preferential way to the poor and afflicted in the historical events of liberation in the Old Testament. He comes to their aid and reveals himself as a compassionate God who is not indifferent to their plight. The poor thus become the *locus theologicus* in the OT theology. In other words, the insufficiency of the needy is a place of God's action and revelation. Thus, according to the OT tradition, the poor have a hermeneutically privileged place in God's plan, and God himself becomes the model of the preferential option for the poor.

### 3. Jesus and the Poor

The public ministry of Jesus, especially in the Gospel of Luke, began as the good news to the poor. Jesus reads from the Book of Isaiah: "The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor" (Lk 4:18). Does it mean that the Gospel is propagating just pauperism? Not at all! "God does not intend poverty and misery for his creation, but rather wealth and plenty; and that God's special concern for the poor thus can never be understood in a static-metaphysical sense, but only as a phase in the historical drama between God and humanity."<sup>10</sup> It is the subsequent sinful structure of human society that has given rise to social inequality. In the Exodus story, as seen above, God challenged that oppressive structure and offered an alternative with the Sinai Covenant, creating God's people as a contrasting society.

Although the poor and poverty were dominant themes in the earliest materials of the Gospels, they lost their importance in the later NT traditions and in the early Church. This was largely because the world had changed radically for the early Christian communities, and Christians were so preoccupied with their internal community' concerns that they had no time for the social problems of the day.<sup>11</sup> This was not the case when Jesus began his ministry. So, we shall see briefly how poor was an important theme for Jesus.

One may ask: who was Jesus? What was his social condition? Nardoni puts it aptly:

Before his public ministry, Jesus was neither a farmer, a landowner, a merchant, nor a wealthy man. On the other hand, he was not needy or a beggar. He was characterized as a *tekton* ("carpenter" or "artisan"). This term did not designate someone who was indigent but, rather, a person who possessed skills that conferred a certain social identity, enabling one to work wherever his service was needed. Neither were his disciples indigent. Some were fishermen who had laborers in their service (Mk 1:20). There was even a tax collector among them.<sup>12</sup>

We know from the Gospel accounts of his public ministry that Jesus chose poverty in accordance with his mission, which Luke skilfully develops in the episode in the synagogue of Nazareth (Lk 4:16-21). And what kind of poverty did he choose? In all probability, looking at the Gospel narratives, it can be said with a fair degree of certainty that he assumed the poverty of an itinerant prophet and teacher. He embraced poverty to preach the Kingdom of God. Although he preached the Kingdom to both the poor and the rich, he did not promote a social revolution of the poor against the rich. But Jesus taught the futility of wealth and warned of the danger of becoming a victim of one's wealth (Mt 10:17-27). Jesus' life and preaching invited the rich to rethink their behaviour and change their lives according to the new order that the Kingdom of God would establish (Lk 19:1-10).

As mentioned above, the central theme of Jesus' teaching was the Kingdom of God. This was not just an inner predisposition of an individual or an ideology. For Jesus, the Kingdom was a complex reality. It encompassed spiritual, social, political, and temporal realities. It is important to remember that in Jesus' time in Palestine, religion and politics were intertwined. As a prophet and teacher, Jesus could not escape the social and political realities of his day. Therefore, his message had social and political implications. The New Testament testifies that Jesus was concerned with the whole life of the people in all its dimensions,

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid, 46.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid, 48-49.

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<sup>12</sup> Nardoni, *Rise up, O Judge*, 181



especially if we take into account his healing and teaching ministries. One of the social realities of his time, as of all times, was the sad plight of the poor.<sup>13</sup> For him, poverty concerned both the spiritual and the temporal aspects of human existence. Jesus addressed this theme in the Beatitudes, especially in the first.

Some commentators believe that the Sermon on the Mount and its teachings came from a pre-Matthean oral tradition. “Their content was to be delivered orally, that is, spoken aloud, repeated, and memorized.”<sup>14</sup> The author of Matthew’s Gospel incorporated these teachings into his Gospel without much change. It contains the core teachings of Jesus from a conservative Judeo-Christian perspective. The first part of the Beatitudes (Mt 5:3-6) speaks of the inheritors of the Kingdom of God and their present social condition. These heirs of the Kingdom are the poor. Jesus assures them that their present condition will not last forever. There will be an eschatological reversal.

It is significant to note that Matthew qualifies the poor with the expression “poor in spirit” (*ptochoi to pneumatē*) which is missing in Luke’s parallel verse (Lk 6:20). Matthew may have added it to emphasize that material poverty alone does not entitle one to enter the Kingdom of God. A religious attitude, with an inner commitment to poverty, is also necessary. In other words, Matthew wants to emphasize that not all materially deprived persons will be counted as blessed, but only those who experience material poverty along with a deep trust in God. At the same time, however, it must be said that being “poor in spirit” as a religious attitude is not sufficient to inherit the Kingdom of God, since the following verses (Mt 5:4-6) give a list of people who are the companions of the poor. Their condition is not a spiritual attitude or just an “inner commitment to poverty”<sup>15</sup> but a social reality: “The poor in spirit are placed parallel to those who actually mourn, who are oppressed, and who hunger and thirst. To all of these is promised not a reward

for their virtue but the eschatological reversal of their present condition in the new world of the Kingdom of God.”<sup>16</sup> Moreover, if we read it together with the Lucan version of Jesus’ saying, we cannot say that the poor in spirit in Matthew refers only to a person’s spiritual/religious attitude. Simply put, “poor in spirit” in Matthew cannot be read in isolation.

The biblical concept of the poor must also be understood from a Christological perspective. Through the Incarnation, God identifies himself with humanity. This identification is concretely realised in space and time in Palestine two thousand years ago. God becomes a human being, *Emmanuel*. He shares our finite human reality. His life is not only a sharing of human existence, but a pro-existence. That is to say, it is an existence-for-others. Who are these others? The needy. Even in his pro-existence, he shares our human limitations. His earthly life is confined to a geographically limited group with all its cultural and traditional limitations. But within this limited group, he has a preference: the poor.

Jesus’ preferential option for the poor and needy is evident in his life and ministry. This preference for the poor is not just an individual choice of Jesus. He expects it of all who follow him. This is the message of the parable of the Last Judgement (Mt 25:31-46). The list of people who receive God’s preferential attention includes the hungry, the thirsty, the strangers, the naked, the sick, and the prisoners. There is no reference to nationality or religion. In other words, the preferential option is universal, embracing the peoples of all nations. How does he identify himself with all nations? The answer comes from the Judge’s reply to the astonished people of nations: “‘Lord, when did we see you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or needing clothes or sick or in prison, and did not help you?’ He will reply, ‘Truly I tell you, whatever you did not do for one of the least of these, you did not do for me’” (Mt 25:44-45). Here Jesus identifies himself with the poor, with those who need our attention. “The new society arising out of Jesus’ gospel for the poor is in the world now. Long ago it broke through the bounds of the original Israel, and the pilgrimage of the

<sup>13</sup> Cf. J. Jeremias, *Jerusalem in the Time of Jesus* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1969), 109-119.

<sup>14</sup> H.D. Betz, *The Sermon on the Mount: A Commentary on the Sermon of the Mount, including the Sermon on the Plain (Matthew 5:3-7:27 and Luke 6: 10- 49)* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2011), 83.

<sup>15</sup> Lohfink, *Option for the Poor*, 62.

<sup>16</sup> Nardoni, *Rise up, O Judge*, 221.

nations has been in progress ever since.”<sup>17</sup> As Christianity expands, especially after the Paschal Mystery, the horizon widens.

The key to this widening of horizons is the poor and the needy. In a sense, it is the option for the poor that marks the universalism of Christianity. The least of this world have become the brothers and sisters of Jesus Christ: “The face of the needy is the face of Christ.”<sup>18</sup>

*(The Second part of the article Continued....)*

## Part II

### 4. The Poor in Theology

The poor became a prominent theme in theology with Latin American liberation theology’s advocacy of a ‘preferential option for the poor.’ Until then, in theology, poverty was a concept that remained in the realm of those who sought spiritual perfection. Such an understanding of poverty either highlighted the sinful nature of the human condition before God or the virtue of renouncing worldly possessions in order to serve God through a life of simplicity. While the former emphasised the spiritual attitude of humility of heart over greed and pride, the latter invited a certain category of Christians, especially religious, to renounce personal possessions through a vow to achieve spiritual excellence. Although religious people strive to give up worldly goods, being in the world, they cannot help but use worldly things to advance in their spiritual progress. Therefore, “religious poverty seeks to enter into a stylized form of physical poverty in order to fully realize spiritual poverty.”<sup>19</sup> Before liberation theology emerged, however, very little space was given in theological discourse to the actual poor who lacked the basic necessities of life.

Even when the poor found a place in theological considerations, it was for the benefit of the rich. Echoing a certain strand of the OT concept of magnanimity (Lev 23:22), such reflections encouraged the rich to show charity to the less well-off in order to gain spiritual benefits for

themselves. In other words, the rich remained the protagonists who were asked to recognise that poverty and wealth represented spiritual opportunities and temptations. Moreover, the theological interpretation of poverty was closely related to its understanding of salvation. The rich were often reminded that the poor embodied Christ and were privileged in God’s eyes. The rich needed them as objects of charity for their own sanctification. “This became the ‘social contract of the Middle Ages, that is, the duty of the poor to remain poor so that the salvation of the rich might be secured. Poverty became not a problem to be solved but an opportunity for the rich to obtain merit.”<sup>20</sup>

Liberation theologians changed this perspective and placed the poor at the centre of theological discourse. In a sense, liberation theology itself can be understood as an attempt to radicalise the social doctrine of the Church for the cause of the poor. For it, the poor are not cannon fodder for the spiritual benefit of the rich.

They have their own identity and are the privileged locus of theological reflection. Moreover, for liberation theologians, poverty is not an imaginary spiritual concept but a physical reality here and now. In short, it is the merit of Latin American theology to have rescued the poor from the shadow of abstract theological reflection.

### 5. Latin American Theology and the Poor

Broadly speaking, Latin American theology has two strands of thought - liberation theology and the theology of the people. The theology of the people is generally regarded as a post-conciliar theology developed in Argentina, notably by Lucio Gera and Rafael Tello, based on popular culture and piety. Liberation theology, on the other hand, is a pan-Latin American ecclesial movement that has sought to shape Church and society through distinctive ideas and practices. But even in Argentina, until the disagreements about the meaning of revolution and armed struggle, the spirit of liberation theology and the inspiration of the Latin American Bishops’ Conference of Medellin (1968) were present.<sup>21</sup>

<sup>17</sup> Lohfink, *Option for the Poor*, 61-62.

<sup>18</sup> Nardoni, *Rise up, O Judge*, 234.

<sup>19</sup> B. Pattison “Poverty,” in *The Cambridge dictionary of Christian theology*, ed. I. A. McFarland (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 400.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> According to Loland, the electoral success of the political left in Latin America, especially in Venezuela and Brazil, is partly the result of political mobilisation