

nations has been in progress ever since.”¹⁷ 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.”¹⁸

(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.”¹⁹ 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.”²⁰

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.²¹

¹⁷ Lohfink, *Option for the Poor*, 61-62.

¹⁸ Nardoni, *Rise up, O Judge*, 234.

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

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ 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

At the risk of oversimplifying, it can be said that while the theology of the people focuses on culture and evangelisation, liberation theology emphasises the praxis of faith and its demands on society in the face of abject poverty, injustice, and oppression. According to Azcuy, the difference between these two schools boils down to the option between ‘evangelisation’ and ‘liberation.’²² Although both schools do concern themselves with the poor, they differ in their approach. While the theology of the people arrives at the poor through the Second Vatican Council’s notion of the ‘people of God’ and its interrelationships with various peoples, liberation theologians like Gutierrez locate the poor in their unjust historical and social context within the framework of the Christian faith. As Scannone has maintained, the theology of the people has privileged a historical-cultural analysis over the structural social analysis of liberation theology. Furthermore, the theology of the people is distinguished from liberation theology in its refusal to be informed by the thought and categories of Marxist philosophy.²³ For the theology of the people, the poor are those who preserve the very culture of their people as the structuring principle of everyday common life and preserve the historical memory of the people. The poor guarantee the interests of the people with a common historical project of justice and peace, especially when they live in an oppressive situation of structural injustice and institutionalised violence. For the advocates of the theology of the people, therefore, the option for the poor coincides with the option for culture.²⁴

Liberation theologians, on the other hand, go beyond the above position on the question of the poor. They believe that the poor are the privileged locus of God’s action in the world and that there is no need to seek justification for

a commitment to the poor on the basis of cultural or theological premises. That is why Gutierrez affirms,

The Church’s pastoral action is not arrived at as a conclusion from theological premises. Theology does not lead to pastoral activity, but is rather a reflection on it. Theology should find the Spirit present in it, inspiring the actions of the Christian community. The life of the Church will be for it a *locus theologicus*.²⁵

Liberation theologians come to this conviction because their theology has grown out of the lived experience of Christian communities in close solidarity with the oppressed. It is a way of *doing* theology.²⁶ Their reflections start from the lived experience of faith, shared and celebrated in practice (*praxis*). In other words, liberation theologians insist on the primacy of *praxis* over isolated spirituality.²⁷ Theology is inconceivable if not related to *praxis*. For them, in the ecclesial context, community in *praxis* takes precedence over community in truth. *Praxis* is the “first act” of faith. Theology comes only afterward as a “second act.”²⁸ In other words, liberation theology starts its reflection, not from an abstraction of faith, but from the underside of the history of faith, from the “antihistory” of the lowly and downtrodden. Therefore, it takes on the gaze of the poor. At the same time, it is a critical reflection on the historical *praxis* of faith in relation to the word of God. Such a reflection of faith cannot be done without a liberation *praxis*. It is an understanding of faith from the perspective of an option and a commitment.²⁹ In Sobrino’s words,

A supposed faith in God that would allow injustice, for whatever reason, or would allow

within grassroots Catholic communities inspired by liberation theology. See, O.J. Loland, “The Solved Conflict: Pope Francis and Liberation Theology,” *International Journal of Latin American Religions* 5/2 (2021): 290-291.

²² V.R. Azcuy, “Introduction,” in *La Teología Argentina Del Pueblo*, eds. V.R. Azcuy and Lucio Gera (Santiago de Chile: Ediciones Universidad Alberto Hurtado, 2015), 30.

²³ J.C. Scannone, “Pope Francis and the Theology of the People,” *Theological Studies* 77/1 (2016): 124.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 120-21.

²⁵ G. Gutierrez, “Notes for a Liberation Theology,” *Theological Studies* 31/2 (1970): 244-45.

²⁶ V. Araya Guillen, *God of the Poor: The Mystery of God in Latin American Liberation Theology* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1987), 16.

²⁷ Loland, “The Solved Conflict: Pope Francis and Liberation Theology,” 293.

²⁸ G. Gutierrez, *Power of the Poor in History* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1983), 200.

²⁹ G. Gutierrez, *A Theology of Liberation: History, Politics and Salvation* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1988), 9.

peaceful coexistence with injustice, would not really be faith at all. One who does not struggle against death and against the idols that kill does not have true faith in the God of life. Faith in God means rejection of murderous idols, and this is not simply in intention but in practice.³⁰ The liberation theologians therefore propose a sort of ecclesial *praxis* in the form of concrete struggle for the oppressed as the starting point for the true faith.

Like Metz in political theology, liberation theologians believe that any treatment of positive themes in theology such as God, Christ, and the Kingdom of God, without regard to its believing subject is a pointless abstraction. Christian faith is primarily a *practical* idea.³¹ When liberation theology asserts that the *praxis* of faith is the “first act,” it must show who the subject of this act is. In Latin America, the poor, in a real and material sense, are the subject of this faith-guided action (*praxis*). These are the oppressed, the marginalised, the hungry, and those whose basic right to life is threatened. In faith, these “subjects” approach and experience the great theological themes from “their” perspective. Therefore, Araya Guillen affirms, “Liberation theology is not a theology of the poor (as a new theme), or a theology for the poor (as addressed paternalistically to the poor), but a theology set in motion from a point of departure in the poor, the poor as interlocutor, as historical subject.”³² For liberation theology, meaning arises when there is a fusion of horizons — divine and human. Therefore, it believes that theological themes such as God, Christ, Church, etc. cannot be treated in isolation, without taking into account the “subjects” and their daily experience of faith. From this perspective, liberation theology speaks of the poor as *locus theologicus* and makes explicit the fundamental content of their perspective.

Absent from history until now, the poor in Latin America are suddenly becoming present to it. This privileged theological role of the poor enables liberation theology to situate and

articulate Christian themes in a credible manner. For them, the principal and genuine mediation to access the mystery of God in an oppressed context is the poor. According to Sobrino, “access to the ever greater and transcendent God comes through contact with the God who is ‘lesser,’ hidden in the little ones, crucified on the cross of Jesus and on the countless crosses of the oppressed of our day.”³³ That is why Gutierrez argues that the forms of God’s presence determine how we come to encounter God. “If humanity, each person, is the living temple of God, we meet God in our encounter with others; we encounter God in the commitment to the historical process of humankind.”³⁴ Consequently, theological reflection should bear in mind that the experience of the mystery of God consists not only in knowing that we are dependent on him, but also in knowing that he makes demands on us.

But who then are the poor for the liberation theologians? For them, defining the poor based on “creaturely poverty” does not do justice to the poor of this world. It is not just a human attribute, claiming that being poor is part of the human constitution as a creature. Every human being as such is needy, incomplete, and limited in self-realisation, especially in relation to death. For liberation theologians, such an understanding does not face the problem head-on and avoids the real issue. For them, poverty is not a natural “accident” of need, but is structural. The poor are therefore the by-product of social injustice. It needs to be addressed in the light of a mature Christian faith derived from the Gospel of Jesus Christ. It calls for an option for the poor, not just charity. It requires reading the signs of the times and applying the theological method indicated by the Second Vatican Council (GS 4): see, judge, act.³⁵

To validate their claim, they point to the ministry of Jesus. Since Jesus identifies with the poor, his followers must be committed to the poor. In the face of systemic poverty and exploitation, the Church must make a conscious choice. This choice is called the ‘option for the poor.’ It cannot be just any option, but it must

³⁰ J. Sobrino, *The True Church and the Poor* (London: SCM Press, 1984), 57.

³¹ J.B. Metz, *Faith in History and Society: Toward a Practical Fundamental Theology* (New York: Crossroad Publishing Company, 2007), 60-84.

³² Guillén, *God of the Poor*, 20.

³³ Sobrino, *The True Church and the Poor*, 56.

³⁴ Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation*, 110.

³⁵ Cf. Guillén, *God of the Poor*, 113-120.

be a ‘preferential option.’ One cannot ignore the fact that the poor cannot claim equality with the rich under present conditions. They are not present in the decision-making or decision-taking process of the present social order that directly affects their lives. The rich exercise power and the poor are excluded or pushed to the margins of society. Without a preferential option, the poor are nowhere to be found. It calls for affirmative actions that enable the poor to be the protagonists of their own lives. We know from the Gospel that Jesus made this preferential option with sinners and outcasts. They were the poor of his time. This is why liberation theologians have generally argued that, in the face of gross social and economic inequality, to be the Church of all means to be the Church of the poor, since failure to side with the poor invariably reinforces the structures that cause poverty and thereby belies the Church’s commitment to the good of all. To describe this option as ‘preferential’ is to affirm that it is relative rather than absolute: to opt for the poor is not to reject or ignore other groups, but to recognise that solidarity with the poor is God’s means of realising the blessings of the Kingdom of God for all people.³⁶

In their theological reflections, some liberation theologians have sought to use Marxist class analysis to highlight the ‘epistemological privilege of the poor’ in their efforts to understand the Gospel’s critique of unjust economic and political structures. They argue that communion with God is only possible through identification with and commitment to the cause of the poor, through whom God is revealed. According to Pattison, recent Catholic Magisterium prior to Pope Francis has been cautious in adopting the language of the ‘preferential option.’

The Vatican has appeared more inclined to use the language of ‘preferential love’ as a means of affirming the Church’s commitment to the poor while both (John Paul II and Benedict XVI) avoiding any suggestion that this commitment is exclusive and distancing itself from explicitly

Marxist principles of social analysis and revolutionary praxis.³⁷

6. Pope Francis and the Poor

Since Cardinal Jorge Bergoglio became Pope, the poor have become a major theme in Catholic theological discourse. Pope Francis believes that the poor have an important role to play in the life of the Church. This is evidenced by the fact that, for the first time, the Church established the *World Day of the Poor* in 2017. For Pope Francis, the scandal of poverty in a world of plenty is a piercing moral challenge for the Church and the whole human community.³⁸ Choosing “Francis” as his name, Cardinal Bergoglio would signal that as Pope where his priorities are. He sees his ministry as a call to serve the poor. He wants a Church that is poor and for the poor. Early in his pontificate, he recalls how he perceived God’s call to lead the Church as an invitation to care for the poor.

During the election, I was sitting next to the Archbishop Emeritus of Sao Paulo and Prefect Emeritus of the Congregation for the Clergy, Cardinal Claudio Hummes, a good friend. When things started to move in a dangerous direction, he comforted me. When the votes reached the two thirds, there was the usual applause, because I had been elected. Then, he hugged, kissed, and told me: “Do not forget the poor!” That word made an impact on me: the poor, the poor. Immediately, I thought of Francis of Assisi in relation to the poor.³⁹

Pope Francis would interpret this option for the poor through symbolic acts such as refusing to live in the papal palace, washing the feet of prisoners on Holy Thursday, or planning papal visits to places associated with social exclusion. Being of Argentine origin, Pope Francis is naturally influenced by Latin American theology. But Pope Francis’ interest in the poor cannot be explained by the ideas of liberation theology. Rather, he is concerned about some of the ideological infiltrations of liberation theology. Although there is now a *bonhomie* between Pope Francis and liberation

³⁶ I. M. McFarland, “Option for the Poor,” in *The Cambridge dictionary of Christian theology*, ed. I. A. McFarland (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 406.

³⁷ Pattison, “Poverty,” 401.

³⁸ R.W. McElroy, “A Church for the Poor,” *America* 209/11 (21 Oct 2013), 13.

³⁹ Pope Francis, “A Church that is poor and is for the poor,” *L’Osservatore Romano*, Eng. ed., 20 March 2013, 6.

theologians, some writers still believe that Pope Francis engages with liberation theology through symbolic gestures rather than open intellectual engagement with specific expressions of the movement's innovative ideas.⁴⁰ As Archbishop of Buenos Aires, he emphasised that the Church should not engage in partisan or ideological politics and insisted that the Church's concern for the poor should flow from the dictates of the Gospel. On this point, he seems to have been inspired by the theology of the people as advocated by Rafael Tello and Lucio Gera.⁴¹ In addition, Pope Francis' ecclesial vision of the poor is strongly influenced by the teaching of Pope Paul VI, especially his apostolic exhortation on evangelisation, *Evangelii Nuntiandi* (1975). Pope Francis himself acknowledges it when he says that "*Evangelii Nuntiandi* is the greatest pastoral postconciliar document."⁴² Pope Francis believes that the preferential option for the poor should be above any party or "class outlook" and it should embrace multiple ways of approaching the poor, ranging from traditional Christian charity to modern social activism. Having said that, however, he does not spare the inhuman trickle-down theories and market economy of the present day.

Just as the commandment "Thou shalt not kill" sets a clear limit in order to safeguard the value of human life, today we also have to say "thou shalt not" to an economy of exclusion and inequality. Such an economy kills. How can it be that it is not a news item when an elderly homeless person dies of exposure, but it is news when the stock market loses two points? This is a case of exclusion. Can we continue to stand by when food is thrown away while people are starving? This is a case of inequality (*Evangelii Gaudium*, no. 53).

Here the Pope highlights the link between the realities of economic inequality and the death of the poor, on the one hand, and the idolatry of money and the deadly logic of the market economy, on the other. When he states that the

challenge today is not so much atheism as the "spiritual consumerism tailored to one's own unhealthy individualism" that accompanies the idolatry of the modern economy, he seems to echo the concerns raised by Sobrino.⁴³

As mentioned above, Pope Francis often warns against mixing faith with "ideology," whether from the extreme right or the proactive left. Conservatives may use faith as a tool to advance their pet projects in the name of fidelity to tradition. In doing so, they may ignore the signs of the times and the promptings of the Holy Spirit. On the other hand, activists can use religion as an ideological platform to promote personal or sectarian agendas in the name of social commitment. When the Church's faith becomes an ideology, it frightens people and drives them away. According to Pope Francis, Jesus is not present in ideologies with his love, forgiveness, and tenderness. When a Christian becomes a disciple of an ideology, he/she loses the power of faith: he/she is no longer a disciple of Jesus, but a disciple of a certain thought.⁴⁴ For Pope Francis, the fundamental problem with ideology is that it excludes others who have a perspective other than their own, thus narrowing the missionary horizon.

It's important not to exclude anybody, and not to exclude oneself, because everybody needs everybody. A fundamental part of helping the poor involves the way we see them. An ideological approach is useless: it ends up using the poor in the service of other political or personal interests (*EG*, 199). Ideologies end badly, and are useless. They relate to people in ways that are either incomplete, unhealthy, or evil. Ideologies do not embrace a people. You just have to look at the last century. What was the result of ideologies? Dictatorships, in every case. Always think to the people, never stop thinking about the good of the people.⁴⁵

The bottom line is that, for Pope Francis,

⁴³ J. Sobrino, *Jesus The Liberator: A Historical-Theological Reading of Jesus of Nazareth* (Kent: Bums & Oates, 1994), 180-86.

⁴⁴ Pope Francis, Apostolic Exhortation, *Amoris laetitia*, no. 308; cf. Pope Francis, "Disciples of the Lord and not of ideology," *L'Osservatore Romano*, Eng. ed., 25 October 2013, 13.

⁴⁵ Pope Francis, "A more humane society is possible," *L'Osservatore Romano*, Eng. ed., 17 July 2015, 17. See also Pope Francis, "Se la stanchezza mi annebbierà darò le dimissioni," *La Repubblica*, 10 March 2023, 10.

⁴⁰ Cf. Loland, "The Solved Conflict: Pope Francis and Liberation Theology," 288-89

⁴¹ See Pope Francis, "Prefazione," in E.C. Bianchi, *Introduzione alla teologia del popolo* (Bologna: EMI, 2015), 18-22.

⁴² Pope Francis, "The Three Loves of Paul VI," *L'Osservatore Romano*, Eng. ed., 26 June 2013, 5.

ideology runs the risk of being motivated by strategies that are often socially conditioned and reactionary in nature. The faith-driven pursuit of God's will, on the other hand, is a dispassionate and yet purpose-oriented Christian existence. Therefore, Pope Francis asks us to reflect on what motivates us to act in a particular way. Does the Gospel, especially the message of love, guide our actions? Is it part of the believer's ongoing process of discernment? In other words, while we are on the side of the poor, we cannot avoid the question of what motivates us to have the option for the poor. At the end of the day, for Pope Francis, it is not great ideas that we can give to others, but ourselves.

7. The Option for the Poor and Its Challenge Today

Following in the footsteps of Pope Francis, we can highlight one of the challenges that the option for the poor is facing today, as it always has. Every option requires a purification of intention. If Christian social action, including the option for the poor, is not motivated by the Gospel, it is open to suspicion and criticism of mixed motives, whether personal or communitarian. If not perceived as a genuine act of love born of evangelical conviction, it could be interpreted as an attempt at proselytism and religious expansion, or as sheep-stealing. It could also be seen as an expression of suppressed resentment, which Nietzsche used to discredit Christianity. For Nietzsche, the Christian's love of the poor is nothing but camouflaged resentment, a subtle but powerful revenge of the weak against the strong.⁴⁶

Nietzsche claims that the Christian concern for the poor is an outgrowth of Jewish morality. In his view, the often-conquered Jewish people achieved "spiritual revenge" over the powerful civilisations through a slave revolt in morality. A sense of powerlessness in the face of foreign conquerors led Jewish civilisation to invent a new system of spiritual values based on the wretchedness of the poor, the impotent, the sick, and the ugly. Judaism achieved its victory over

the powerful through the message of love that brought blessedness and victory to the poor, the sick, and the sinners. Finally, the resentment-laden Jews transferred to their God the vengeance they themselves could not address. For Nietzsche, Jesus is the embodiment of this transfer of hatred. "Did Israel not reach the pinnacle of her sublime vengefulness via this very 'redeemer,' this apparent opponent of disperser of Israel?"⁴⁷ In Nietzsche's interpretation, the ideal of Christian love of the poor is the triumphant crown of Jewish hatred toward the power whom they cannot defeat. In short, according to Nietzsche, the Christian's idea of God is still avenging Yahweh. The only difference is that revenge is now disguised as a false love for the wretched.⁴⁸

This distorted view of Christianity and its understanding of love, as presented by Nietzsche, is totally unacceptable to any Christian who knows what he/she believes and whom he/she follows. But Nietzsche's observations make us reflect on our own motives for choosing to serve the poor. Put simply, why do we choose to serve the poor? Are we really moved by the spirit of love and concern for the needy that we find in Jesus, as he explains in the parable of the Good Samaritan (Lk 10:25-37), or by an exaggerated sense of justice? Do our own histories, personal ideas, agendas, ideologies, or states of being influence how we choose to act? We are reminded of Tolstoy's saying: "As fire cannot extinguish fire, so evil cannot suppress evil. Good alone, confronting evil and resisting its contagion, can overcome evil."⁴⁹ Spiritually, this is a great challenge for every Christian who chooses to serve the poor.

8. Concluding Remarks

The Bible teaches that assisting the poor is not only a moral imperative, but also a way of honouring God and showing compassion to our fellow human beings. Jesus emphasises the link between caring for the poor and serving God: "Truly I say to you, as you did it to one of the

⁴⁶ F.W. Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morality* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2017). See also M. Scheler, *L'homme du ressentiment* (Paris: Gallimard, 1933).

⁴⁷ Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morality*, 18.

⁴⁸ Cf. P.H. Byrne, "Resentment and the Preferential Option for the Poor," *Theological Studies* 54 (1993): 218-19.

⁴⁹ L. Tolstoy, *My Religion - What I Believe* (Guildford: White Crow Books, 2009), 41.

least of these my brethren, you did it to me” (Mt 25:40). The first Christian communities put this into practice. For example, the Acts of the Apostles shows how the Church responded to the needy by sharing resources, caring for the vulnerable, and giving generously to those in need (Acts 6:1 -7). Following the Church’s tradition, the poor have been part of Christian practice and reflection throughout the centuries. However, the poor became a *locus theologicus* only with the emergence of liberation theology and the recent ecclesial consciousness of social justice after the Second Vatican Council. Liberation theologians stress the need for the Church to stand in solidarity with the poor, to listen to their voices and experiences, and to work with them to build a more just and equitable society. This involves not only providing material assistance to the poor, but also working to change the systems and structures that perpetuate poverty and inequality.

Having said that, however, today we need to re-examine this option for the poor in order to make it more effective in the footsteps of Jesus Christ. A maxim attributed to Lord Hewart says, “Justice must not only be done but must also be seen to be done.” In the same way, Christian service to the poor must not only be done justly, but must also be seen to be done with integrity and the right intention. Perception is an important element of witness. Through our works or actions, others must be able to perceive and be drawn to the source of all human beings, the invisible God who expressed himself as love in Jesus Christ. That is why, in his homily to the Latin American Church, Pope Benedict XVI reminds the faithful that “the Church does not engage in proselytism. Instead, she grows by ‘attraction’: just as Christ ‘draws all to himself’ by the power of his love, culminating in the sacrifice of the Cross.”⁵⁰

From a Christian point of view, the option for the poor without Christ not only means not sharing in the ministry of Jesus, but can also be an expression of self-centred philanthropy for grandstanding and self-aggrandisement. The Christian cannot separate the commandment of

the unity of love (Mk 12:29-31), either for an exaggerated and fanatical love for God without loving the others, or for a pure social action without any reference to the source of this action, God. Lohfink rightly says that only by following Jesus will we be able to create the new society that God has in mind. There is no easy way out except through the practice of faith. “Anyone who interprets the central texts of the Bible concerning the poor as meaning some kind of aid for the poor that is possible without faith and without transformation of the world within the believing community is misusing these texts and is not doing them justice.”⁵¹

Again, the way in which we serve the poor is also important. St. Paul urges us to be cheerful givers (2 Cor 9:7). That is why Pope Francis asks us to reflect on how we give charity to others: “Am I able to stop and look in the face, in the eye of that person who is asking me?”⁵² Our solidarity with the poor (by sharing in their lives or by offering material or financial help to those in need) should be an expression of our experience of faith, which Pope Francis identifies with the joy of the Gospel.

Finally, as Christians, we cannot deny that the poor are a *locus theologicus* of God’s revelation. If so, it also testifies to how we understand God (the image of God we have) and how we communicate that image to others. In other words, the way we treat the poor shows what kind of God we follow and how much we have understood him. At the same time, the Christian understanding of God tells us that he is neither indifferent nor vindictive and retributive in the face of human suffering. He patiently invites all to conversion and encourages us to work with him for a better world, for he is a God of love. If God is love, then our lives should be an imitation of that love (1 Jn 4:8).

(Ref : *Vidyajyoti Journal of theological reflection*, Vol. 87, No. 10, October, pp. 30 – 41, part I and Vol. 87, No. 11, November, 2023, pp. 8 – 23, part II).

⁵⁰ Benedict XVI, “Be faithful disciples, so as to be courageous and effective missionaries,” *L’Osservatore Romano*, Eng. ed., 16 May 2007, 13.

⁵¹ N.E Lohfink, *Option for the Poor: The Basic Principle of Liberation Theology in the Light of the Bible* (Berkeley: Bibal Press, 1987), 64.

⁵² Pope Francis, “Look Them in the Eye,” *L’Osservatore Romano*, Eng. ed., 15 April 2016, 16.