

## **“OPTING FOR THE POOR” IN OUR CATHOLIC SCHOOLS**

“Those who contribute five dollars get to name the baby!”

I still to this day remember very well that tantalizing promise made many years ago when I was attending St. Patrick's Parish grammar school in Tacoma, Washington. When we contributed our money to help missionaries baptize and educate “poor pagan babies,” we were taught that we were doing our part of improve the world.

How many poor Chinese babies named “Patrick” or “Mary” grew up to subsequently become Communist Red Guard members, I don't know! But I do know that, having experienced the campaigns to “buy pagan babies” (however theologically unenlightened these campaigns might have been), I myself grew up to appreciate that my Christian faith did have a strong “missionary” dimension. This at least meant sharing with others the Good News that had been shared with me. And central to that dimension is what we today like to call “the option for the poor.” (1)

### **MEANING OF THE OPTION**

What does this option for the poor mean and what are its implications for the work today of Catholic educational institutions in the United States?

I believe that the basic meaning of the “option for the poor” is simply the following of Jesus in his identification with the poor (Matthew 25:31-46), in his proclamation of Good News for the poor (Luke 4:14-21); in his challenge to those who hold positions of power (Mark 10:42-45); in his respect for the poor and lowly (Luke 21:1-4); and in his work for a Kingdom of justice for the poor (Matthew 11:4-6). It is an option, a choice, an orientation, a stance, on the side of the materially disadvantaged and economically deprived who as a consequence of their poverty are powerless, oppressed and marginalized. At root it is a *religious* option but it has very practical *political* consequences.

While the phrase, “option for the poor,” may be of fairly recent origin, its foundation is as old as the Scriptures. The God of Israel showed special concern for the poor and took up their cause (see Psalm 103:6; Proverbs 22:22-23). The “anawim” were the little ones, the widows, orphans, strangers, whom God protected (see Deuteronomy 10:18). That is why the prophets spoke so sharply against the oppression by the rich and the powerful of the poor and weak (see Isaiah 3:24-15; Amos 2:6-7). Jesus carried on the prophetic tradition, when he challenged the rich who ignored the needy around them (see Luke 6:24; Luke 16:19-31; Matthew 19:21). The early Christian community continued a care for the poor by their sharing of goods among all those in need (Acts 4:34-35).

The deeper meaning and wider application of the option for the poor has, of course, been clearly put forth in recent documents of the church's social teaching (CST). Some Catholics mistakenly think is it only a Latin American concern (even a “Marxist” emphasis!). But it was John XXIII who opened the Second Vatican Council in 1962 with the reminder that the church desired in a special way to be the “church of the poor.” The great theme decree of the Council, “The Church in the Modern World,” tells us that it is “especially those who are poor and in any way oppressed” to whom the followers of Jesus must pay attention. John Paul II, in his 1988 letter, “The Social Concern of the Church,” explicitly spoke of the option for the poor as a priority “to which the whole tradition of the church bears witness.” The current pope likes to speak of this option as a “love of preference for the poor,” and he has returned again and again to this theme in his writings and his speeches around the world.

among the inner city poor, as so many recent studies tell us. This fact has been a blessing by the church and also a blessing for the church. But there are many more students who attend Catholic-sponsored institutions who come from non-poor backgrounds. What does these schools' option for the poor mean for these students?

It must mean that the instruction they receive in these schools will open their eyes, touch their hearts and move their hands, in response to the tremendous problems of poverty nationally and globally. When we speak of "problems of poverty," we must remember that we are talking of poor people, of John and Mary, of our sisters and brothers. In a rich nation where one out of four pre-schoolers grow up in poverty, and in an interdependent world where nearly 40,000 children die each day of hunger, the poor must not become only statistics but real people with names and faces.

When Catholic schools truly educate students about poverty -- its dimensions, causes, consequences -- then these schools are fulfilling their option for the poor. In this way the schools will affect the way their graduates vote for candidates, follow professional vocations, pay wages to workers, raise families, etc. Since poverty is so closely linked to issues of racism and sexism, these issues also must be addressed in the schools, both in what is taught and in the way it is taught. For example, the shocking "feminization of poverty" (the fact that the majority of the poor are women and children dependent on women) calls for greater commitment in Catholic schools to teaching respect for the equality of women and to promoting of their participation in decision-making roles in our church and society.

## CONCLUSION

In the 1970s and 1980s, I lived in inner-city Washington DC and saw the great work done by Catholic schools there in directly serving the poor. Living now for many years in Zambia, one of the poorest countries of Africa, my hope is that the option for the poor by Catholic educational institutions in the United States will also indirectly serve the Africans I know. This will come about by committing the students to a political stance, a life-style and a spiritual sensitivity that will make greater global justice a possibility in the years ahead.

Today, Catholic schools may not have the old-fashioned campaigns that encouraged children to "buy poor pagan babies." Instead, we promote in a variety of ways the "option for the poor." While it is true that we cannot now offer students the chance to give a poor baby a name, we can offer them a chance to save that baby's life through the works of justice in our own nation and around the world. And after all, every one of these poor children we might save already does have a name. They are called and in fact really are: "Jesus."

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(1) For further explanation of this topic, and citation of scriptural and church social teaching resources, see Peter J. Henriot, *Opting for the Poor: A Challenge for North Americans* (Washington DC: Center of Concern, 1990).

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