
THE “PREFERENTIAL OPTION FOR THE POOR” IN CATHOLIC SOCIAL THOUGHT FROM JOHN XXIII TO JOHN PAUL II

GERALD S. TWOMEY
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The solidarity which binds all people together as members of a common family makes it impossible for wealthy nations to look with indifference upon the hunger, misery and poverty of other nations whose citizens are unable to enjoy even elementary human rights. (John XXIII as cited in Twomey, p. 63)

To be a Church of the poor and a Church for the poor—this is the challenge that Twomey traces from the papacy of John XXIII to the present day. A thorough and engaging analysis of the development of the idea of a preferential option for the poor, the book examines Catholic social thinking and teaching in light of the Church’s post-Vatican II commitment to greater engagement with the world outside of the institutional Church.

To John XXIII’s own surprise, according to an excerpt from his private journal that Twomey cites, he expected to be a “transitional” Pope, but became a revolutionary leader, touching hearts worldwide and urging the Church to

speaking not only *ad intra*, in and of itself—its faith and internal affairs—but also *ad extra*, in relationship to the world, in order to demonstrate that it both shared in and cared for humanity and longed to be immersed in its most urgent problems: respect for human dignity and the inviolability of human rights; concern for social justice; attention to the gaps between the developing and the industrialized nations; evangelization of the poor and issues of war and peace. (as cited in Twomey, 2005, p. 46)

Twomey chronicles the progress of this idea from its inception—noting that some within the Church believed, and commented publicly, that the Pope had “taken leave of his senses” (Twomey, 2005, p. 68)—as it moved from

being abstract social commentary to more concrete social policy. Twomey notes, as does Greeley in the foreword, that the Church has yet to articulate a coherent, practical plan to implement all of the good intentions it has proclaimed.

Much of the focus of the book is in tracing this evolution from abstract to concrete, from a Eurocentric to a truly global worldview, in the Church's thinking about social justice, a process that, Twomey suggests, is still incomplete. Tracing, for example, the progression in thinking among three documents—*Mater et Magistra* (John XXIII, 1961), *Gaudium et Spes* (Vatican Council II, 1965), and *Populorum Progressio* (Paul VI, 1967)—and their movement from “optimism and seeming naivete” to a “more realistic and nuanced perspective” (Twomey, 2005, p. 116), Twomey nevertheless calls attention to the underrepresentation of African and Latin American bishops' voices during Vatican II and today.

Twomey's study of the post-conciliar Church's thinking about the preferential option for the poor begins in Latin America following the publication of *Populorum Progressio* (Paul VI, 1967), among liberation theologians including Gustavo Gutierrez, Leonardo Boff, and Juan Luis Segundo. These Latin American theologians asked, “What does it mean to be a Christian in the world of the oppressed?” (Twomey, 2005, p. 133). For many of them, the answer was that to be Christian meant to ally oneself with the oppressed and the poor and to work for social change; a popular slogan, “to believe is to practice,” summarized this philosophy (p. 135).

Gutierrez, for example, recognized that the shift in thinking that began to occur in Latin America as social consciousness was raised became controversial through indicating “the poor being the subject of their own history....They have the capacity to evangelize: they are not only the objects of our evangelization, rather they are taking the announcement of the Gospel into their own hands” (Twomey, 2005, p. 165). Twomey's point is that the liberation theologians began to move the Church in Latin America away from paternalism and development and toward collaboration and liberation.

The political implications of such a shift in Church teaching are readily apparent, and attempts to silence or placate liberation theologians became increasingly common in the 1970s. Twomey's discussion of this period is especially interesting as it details Cardinal Josef Ratzinger's role as Prefect of the Congregation of the Doctrine of the Faith and his denouncement of some aspects of liberation theology as “Marxist” and “a fundamental threat to the Faith of the Church” (Twomey, 2005, pp. 213-214).

Moving on to John Paul II's papacy, Twomey chronicles the increasing mainstreaming of the idea of a preferential option for the poor, characterizing it as almost wholly the contribution of Latin American theology.

Examination of John Paul II's sweeping acceptance of this "preferential option" and the sense of purpose it gave to those working for social justice—John Paul II went so far as to call it "the option of Christ and for Christ" (as cited in Twomey, p. 302)—concludes the book.

Twomey's narrative is at its most compelling in his deft analysis of the intersections between politics and Church doctrine and the link—or lack thereof—between belief and action. In discussing the Church's standpoint on the difficult social justice issues at hand, it is telling that Twomey has many more documents to refer to than examples of action taken.

The narrative would have been enriched by a more specific look at how Church documents have filtered down to a few select churches and how their leaders have implemented the ideas and policies alluded to in the documents. What were the short- and long-term political and pastoral consequences of such revolutionary teaching and action? What might this indicate about future challenges the Church will face in the realm of social justice? Perhaps more interestingly for Catholic school leaders, what does this idea mean for Catholic schools and their responsibility to educate the poor? The book's aim is to chronicle the evolution of an idea, not to detail all of its consequences, but it left this reviewer longing for more information and perspectives.

Twomey's in-depth examinations of the many personalities involved in shaping the idea of the "preferential option" are interesting as well and provide a fascinating context through which to view the process of institutional change. Often, however, the reader may wonder why only brief mention is made of the Church in Africa and of the impact of these new ideas on the Church in North America, Europe, and Asia; Twomey's focus is on the Vatican and Latin America almost exclusively.

Overall, this chronicle of the growth of a powerful idea and its gradual acceptance by the mainstream Church is an inspiring and thought-provoking look at the institutional Church, as well as an informative text about modern Church history. The intersections between Church leaders and political leaders, and between the Church as institution and as pastoral leader, are thoughtfully and thoroughly examined in the context of social change. Though it does not touch on what this teaching means for Catholic schools, the book is an excellent resource for Catholic school leaders interested in placing this important social teaching in context. It is also an inspiring testimony about the Church's commitment to the poor that will inspire discussion and action.

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