

# GUSTAVO GUTIÉRREZ, O.P.

“THE PREFERENTIAL OPTION FOR THE POOR: SPIRITUALITY, THEOLOGY AND MINISTRY”  
AQUINAS INSTITUTE OF THEOLOGY | MAY 12, 2017



*Muy queridos amigos y amigas,*

*Como hubiera deseado acompañarlos en estos momentos para agradecerles personalmente la invitación y el honor que tuvieron a bien hacerme para este día, pero ocurre que por ordenes del doctor, todavía estoy en Perú!*

**MY DEAR FRIENDS,**

I would have greatly enjoyed accompanying you during this celebration to personally thank you for the invitation and the honor you have chosen to bestow upon me, but unfortunately I am still in Peru, unable to travel by

doctor's orders! Although I am unable to be physically present, I am with you in spirit, and I would like to share a few words with you as you go forth to minister to others, and to let others minister to you. My remarks will focus on the reality of poverty that marks our world, and thus also on the preferential option for the poor that must mark our response.

Pope Francis speaks constantly about the situation of poverty and marginalization in which a great part of humanity lives. He does this in order to reject poverty and marginalization, and to be faithful to the testimony of Jesus. The condition of poverty is radically contrary to the Christian message, and beckons us to solidarity with those who endure it, a call that the bible expresses with great clarity.

Poverty puts in question the personal dignity of the poor, the recognition of their rights as human persons, and ultimately, their condition as daughters and sons of God. Because of this, poverty is a decisive theological question, a point on which Pope Francis insists.

Poverty is a complex reality that is not limited to its economic aspect, however important that may be. To the economic dimension we must add race, culture, gender, sexual orientation, and religion. In essence, to speak of the poor is to speak of nonpersons, of insignificant ones, for this is what all poor have in common.

Poverty has human causes, for it is a historical reality that results from the ways in which social life has been organized in external structures and in internal ways of thinking. Social insignificance is not a destiny, it is a condition; it is not a misfortune, it is an injustice. It is a product of social regression, of economic interests that are increasingly more ambitious.

The abolition of poverty is in our hands, for it is the same hands that have forged it—poverty is not a fate. We are responsible for it, especially those of us who have greatest power and privilege in society. Pope Francis says that *“the necessity of resolving the structural causes of poverty cannot wait,”* and adds: *“until the problems of the poor are not radically resolved...we will not be able to resolve the problems of the world, or any problem conclusively.”* (EG, 202)

The poverty and insignificance in which many people live violates life, which is a gift from God, and which is also the first human right. In effect, poverty means death, both physical death, early and unjust due to lack of the basic necessities for life, and cultural death, as experienced in oppression and discrimination. Theologically speaking, poverty is the negation of the significance of creation. It is contrary to the will-to-life of the Creator God. What we call the preferential option for the poor is not limited to pastoral work, it is beyond that, for it is a permanent style of life, a fundamental axis of Christian living, appropriate for every follower of Jesus. It is not only a calling for those who are not poor, for it is also a calling for the poor themselves to be in solidarity with all who endure marginalization and are forgotten. The preferential option for the poor unfolds on three levels:

The first is spirituality, or in other words, the following of Jesus. To be Christian is to walk, moved by the Spirit, in the steps of Jesus. The whole of our Christian life resides upon his witness, which gives a global perspective to the life of the believer, while simultaneously influencing the small actions of everyday life. To follow Jesus becomes a way of life. Effectively, spirituality operates in the field of practice, for there is where we live our Christian life, and as the gospel of John reminds us, to believe is to *“do truth”* (John 3:21). Actions are the means through which love is expressed. As Galatians says, *“faith works through love”* (Gal. 5:6) These actions are at the root a sharing of life, of love, of justice, a sharing that brings us into solidarity with the poor. Let us not forget that according to the parable of the Good Samaritan, strictly speaking we do not have neighbors—we make neighbors when we come close to others, when we place ourselves in another’s path.

The second level on which the preferential option for the poor unfolds is theology. The point of departure for all theology is an act of faith, and the elaboration of theology includes all that is part of our social, cultural, and religious world, as well as personal experiences and our visions of reality. In particular, following Jesus and making a preferential option for the poor offers a valuable perspective for theological reflection. Reading the message of Jesus and human history from the perspective of the insignificant reveals essential aspects of the God of our faith and helps us in our attempts to respond to the challenge that all Christians face: how to make present the Kingdom of God. The third level on which the preferential option for the poor unfolds is that of communicating the message. The joy of evangelization, to use Pope Francis’ phrase, is a sign that announces the presence of the kingdom of God among us, and the commitments and demands that derive from it. The episcopal conference of Puebla reminds us that: *“the preferential option for the poor has as its objective the proclamation of Christ the savior who enlightens us about our dignity, aids us in our efforts for liberation from all that we lack, and leads us to communion with the Father and our fellow human beings through a life lived in evangelical poverty (Puebla, 1153).”* Ultimately, the option for the poor is not concerned only with social questions, for at its very heart is witnessing to the Kingdom of God in history.

About fifty years ago, Pope John XXIII spoke to us about *“a church of all, but especially a church of the poor.”* Fifty years later Pope Francis is telling us that he desires a *“church that is poor and for the poor.”* It is this church that the preferential option for the poor seeks.

There is much work ahead of us to give testimony to the good news of the Kingdom of God. As you go forth to serve the forgotten ones in our societies, stay close to the poor, and may you come to recognize the Spirit of Christ who accompanies you, who sustains you, and who calls you ever deeper into the mystery of God’s gratuitous love.

**Many blessings and congratulations on your graduation!**

**Fr. Gustavo Gutiérrez, O.P.**