

University of Dayton

eCommons

Marianist Award Lectures

U.S. Catholic Special Collection

1997

The Poor and Third Millennium

Gustavo Gutiérrez

Follow this and additional works at: https://ecommons.udayton.edu/uscc_marianist_award

Recommended Citation

Gutiérrez, Gustavo, "The Poor and Third Millennium" (1997). *Marianist Award Lectures*. 20.
https://ecommons.udayton.edu/uscc_marianist_award/20

This Book is brought to you for free and open access by the U.S. Catholic Special Collection at eCommons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Marianist Award Lectures by an authorized administrator of eCommons. For more information, please contact mschlangen1@udayton.edu, ecommons@udayton.edu.

GUSTAVO GUTIÉRREZ

Marianist Award Lecture/1997

THE POOR AND THE THIRD MILLENNIUM



The University of Dayton

THE POOR AND THE THIRD MILLENNIUM

by REV. GUSTAVO GUTIÉRREZ

Marianist Award Lecture
1997

THE UNIVERSITY OF DAYTON

Bx
2347.8
.P66
G88
1997

GUSTAVO GUTIÉRREZ was born in Lima, Peru in 1928. He has a license in psychology from Louvain and in theology from Lyons.

He lectures in theology and social science at the Catholic University of Lima. He is also a visiting professor at Union Theological Seminary in New York. He is an editorial director of Concilium.

His major translated work is *A Theology of Liberation*, published in Spanish in 1971 and in English in 1973, which did a great deal to bring this theology to the attention of the English speaking world. He has published in *American Magazine*, *Christian Century*, *Journal of Religion*, *New York Review of Books*, *New York Times* and *Times Literary Supplement*.

The following lecture was given at the University of Dayton on the occasion of the presentation of the Marianist Award to Rev. Gustavo Gutiérrez, April 11, 1997.

Editor's Note:

Without doing violence to the spirit of Rev. Gutiérrez's words, I have endeavored to render the lecture into more consistent English.

Bro. Alex Tuss, S.M.

The following information was obtained from the records of the
Department of the Interior, Bureau of Land Management, at
Washington, D. C., on April 11, 1957.

There is no record of any land owned by the
Department of the Interior, Bureau of Land Management,
at the location of the site of the proposed
project.

THE POOR AND THE THIRD MILLENNIUM

I would like to express my gratitude for the Marianist Award. It is a gift. We cannot refuse a gift and we never deserve it. Thus, we may only say thanks a lot. I can say this in the beautiful word we have in Spanish, "Gracias." "Gracias" to this university for this gift, but also "gracias" for the presence of the Marianist people working in my continent and in my own country. I have very good friends among them.

Father Jim Heft has already announced the subject of this afternoon's lecture. I still have some difficulties expressing myself in English, but I am confident of your tolerance. In the Apostolic letter *Tertio Millennio Adveniente*, Pope John Paul II invites us to celebrate a Jubilee in the year 2000. The Jubilee is a very rich and complex biblical subject directly related to the re-establishment of justice, liberation, equality and the forgiveness of sins. In the same letter, the Pope quotes chapter 4 of Luke's Gospel, a very famous text where Luke presents Jesus assuming the perspective of the Jubilee.

In turn, I would like to present to you what I think is the most important point or contribution of the Latin American church experience and its reflection in these last years, as expressed in this well-known phrase, the "preferential option for the poor." This concept was born in Latin America, and I think it is the best expression of our experience and the fruit of our reflection. The Pope himself invites us to such reflection when he calls us to "an examination of conscience" on the occasion of the Jubilee. He says: "Christians must ask themselves about their responsibility for great forms of injustice and exclusion." And he also says, that in order to do it, we should put a great emphasis "on the church preferential option for the poor and the outcast" (*Tertio M.* n.51).

I would like to reflect on this very well known disposition, this preferential option for the poor, as expressing a very important and old biblical concern. The application as such may be new, but certainly not the idea. The preferential option for the poor arises from the Bible in different ways during the history of Christianity. Maybe one simple way to discuss this question is to analyze each word, "poor," "preference," and "option."

Poverty means death

When we say "option for the poor," we are thinking of the materially poor. Personally, I prefer to say the "real poor," but materially or real is quite clear. The option is for the truly poor. Therefore, we are not speaking about an option for the spiritually poor (the spiritually poor are few; it is easy to develop an option for them...). And what does it mean to be poor, to live in poverty? The word poverty connotes easily and rightly an economic condition of deprivation. But in any ultimate analysis, poverty means an unjust and early death. Let us make the point precisely.

Father Jim has mentioned Las Casas, who, in the 16th century said, "Indians are dying before their time." Unfortunately, it is still true in poor countries, like the Latin American ones, where the poor are dying before their time. They are dying early and unjustly. It is, in the ultimate analysis—I repeat—the real meaning of poverty. When I say this, I am not trying to avoid the economic dimensions of poverty; however, it is important to be clear about the roots of this poverty. I mean physical death, due to hunger or sickness. Some diseases, that in developed countries have already been overcome by medical science, continue to kill people in the developing ones. For example, cholera, as you may have heard, remains powerfully present among us. Recently in Latin America, starting with my own country, hundreds of people died from cholera, even though cholera has been medically overcome. It is very easy to control cholera, unless you are poor. If the poor had some economic power, we would be free of this disease, and there would be no problem because the poor are the only victims of cholera. The poor are often dying in the beginning of their lives.

But I speak not only of physical death; I also speak of a cultural one. When culture is marginalized, when we do not recognize women's human rights, in a sense we are killing them. It is not a physical assassination, but rather the destruction of very important human values that give meaning to their lives. Anthropologists love to say that culture is life. Thus, being against culture is being against life. For this reason, and to finish with this part of the notion of the poor, poverty is never good. We must be very clear about that. Please, remember that poor people may be very good ones, but real poverty is never good because it is contrary to the will of God. Poverty means death, which is contrary to the will of life of the kingdom of God. We must avoid romanticizing poverty. It is never good. We do not love poverty; we love the poor.

In addition, we must also be clear about the causes of poverty. To describe the condition of the poor is relevant, but it is not enough. In order to change the conditions of poverty, we need a structural analysis to understand its causes. If we do not understand the causes, we cannot be efficacious in our opposition to poverty. In the medical field, people speak of etiological treatment, which goes to the causes. I read many years ago, before I took an interest in liberation theology, a statement by Paul Ricoeur, a great Christian philosopher and thinker. He said, "If you are not against poverty, you are not with the poor." It is very simple but very clear. Poverty is an anti-evangelical condition. This expression comes from the Latin American Bishops' conferences (Medellín, Puebla, Santo Domingo). But you know, at the same time, if you identify the causes of poverty, in that moment you risk causing trouble. People prefer only to describe poverty or to speak about the necessity of helping poor people; however, to point out the causes of poverty and overcome them, is the only way to be honest to the poor.

Today the causes of poverty are not exactly the same as they were 30 years ago. Some causes are the same, but there are also several changes, because the international economy today is very different from the one of 30 years ago. The President of the Inter-American Bank

of Development, Enrique Iglesias, of Uruguay, has written this short and interesting remark: "The next century will be fascinating and cruel." Indeed, *fascinating* for one part of humanity; for a lot of people in this country, the United States, for example, and for a small minority in my country of Peru. Today humanity has the capacity to change and transform nature, even beyond our planet. Many people believe this creates great possibilities. The great revolution in recent years is located in the field of knowledge. It is certainly fascinating for this reason. We know so much more. But it is *cruel* for the majority of humanity. What is fascinating for a few is cruel for the great majority of humanity because they are excluded from the realm of knowledge. In addition, people who enjoy this fascination also run the great risk of being isolated in very small groups, forming a kind of exclusive club.

In the report of the United Nations Commission for Human Development, the figures are very clear. The gap between the "haves" and the "have-nots" grows wider and wider. As Christians, we must prevent the repercussions of this situation in the next century. I think the Jubilee is a call by John Paul II to do that, recalling, for instance, one of the principles of the biblical theme of Jubilee: only God is the owner of land; that is to say, we are only administrators. It seems a very old idea, but it is a very rich one for us and for humanity today. To celebrate the Jubilee, opposing poverty is one way to avoid the cruel consequences of today.

For this reason, when the Pope in his *Tertio Millennio Adveniente* speaks about the preferential option for the poor, he immediately quotes Leviticus 25, which underlines the inspiration and the theme of Jubilee, and calls for the elimination of the foreign debt that burdens so much developing countries. This is one modern application of the Jubilee. As you know better than I, the debt was paid by the poor countries a long time ago. Right now, we are paying the interests on the original amounts. My own country today pays around 1000 million dollars a year. Imagine the consequences if this sum could be used to satisfy the needs of our poor people. I think the elimination of foreign debt could

be a clear application of the Jubilee. It is not the solution for world poverty, but it certainly removes a big obstacle today.

To conclude with the question of the poor, I do not pretend to have a good definition of the poor, but I think I have a good approach. It seems to me that the poor are the “insignificant” people. Any person is, of course, significant; but when we see people in our society who are not respected, we may say they “appear” to be insignificant. Again, depending on our economic status, our color, or our gender, we may be insignificant. The poor are the nameless people. They are anonymous during their lives and also after their death. That is what it means to be poor. The economic aspect of poverty is very important, but it is not the only one.

God is the ultimate reason of the preference

I would now like to refer to the second word “preferential.” I will return to the question of the poor later. But what is the meaning of “preferential”? A frequent criticism in our time is that to show a preference is to be unfair. It could be partiality on God’s part as well as on our part. For some other people, the word “preference” is too soft. Others in Latin America prefer to avoid the word “preferentila” and simply speak of an “option for the poor.” I disagree because, in order to understand the meaning of this preference, we must remember the universality of the love of God. Without this proper context, we cannot understand preference. God loves everyone, without exception. This universality is very demanding because we must imitate the behavior of God and love everyone.

Only in such a framework, can we speak about preference. Because preference is not opposed to universality and does not mean exclusion. It means the poor are first and the others “second,” but those who are second are also included. However we have, I admit, a tension between universality and preference. When we speak of preference, we are saying some people are first in my love and in my commitment, too. But

if we forget the universality of God's love, preference becomes a sectarian attitude. On the other hand, if we forget preference, universality becomes very abstract, such as saying, "I love everyone," which is to say, "I really love no one."

What is the reason for this preference? The social analysis of poverty helps us to understand the concrete condition of the poor. The direct experience of poverty is very relevant. Human compassion is an important factor too, but these factors are not the ultimate reasons. The ultimate reason for the preference of the poor is the love of God; the main reason is that God is God. And God prefers the poor because they are the weakest ones, those closest to an unjust and early death. We must prefer the poor, not because *all* of them are good, but because God is good. That is the main and permanent reason. That is why the preferential option for the poor is a theocentric option, not centered in the poor, but rather in God.

Sometimes, when I lecture about this question outside of Peru or Latin America, people tell me: "I understand you very well. You are speaking so strongly about the preference for the poor because you are a Latin American." You know, my answer is always the same: "Please do not think you understand me so easily because being Latin American is not my main motivation; my main motivation is that I believe in the God of Jesus Christ."

If we take this perspective, we understand a classic point in the history of Christian spirituality. John of the Cross never spoke about social poverty, even though he was very poor and his mother at one time was a beggar; however he is very relevant for us. Why? Because John of the Cross is a person who demonstrated that God is God. And we have to say this right in the middle of our social, political and economic commitments as Christians. God is the center of our behavior. John of the Cross recalled this with energy, so he helps us to avoid any kind of idolatry, which is a permanent risk for every Christian. In the Bible, idolatry is the temptation for every believer. For example, some people

working in Latin America, sometimes without realizing it, risk making the poor into some kind of idol. It is important to avoid this idolatry, even in theology. Liberation Theology can be also a little idol for some people. However, the Bible and the saints remind us that God is the ultimate end of our commitments.

I think it is very important to be thrilled about this matter, in order to be very radical in the commitment to the poor, too. If we take seriously the preference for the poor, we may have a new approach to a very important fact today: the relation between *ethics* and the *economy*. From a Christian perspective, ethics has something to say to economics. But today, economics tries to be autonomous without relation to ethics. Economics has appropriated the model of natural science and also pretends to autonomy. This is very dangerous, I think, for people and especially for the poor. What was long considered vice becomes moral value and the virtue at the heart of liberal economy. For example, greed, avarice, and selfishness are legitimated and become good behavior because they are considered the motor of economics. In the past, however, they were considered social evils for humanity.

I want to quote a well-known British economist, Keynes. In 1930, he wrote that once the accumulation of capital is not of such great importance, we will be liberated from some pseudo-moral principles which we have accepted for two centuries since Adam Smith. In ancient times, it was possible to call things by their real names and say avarice was a vice, and love of money was awful. Keynes very lucidly wrote "Beware, the time for all this has not arrived yet, we should wait for at least another hundred years" [that is to say, just thirty years more]. "For at least another hundred years, we must pretend to ourselves, and to everyone that this fair is foul and foul is fair. For foul is useful and fair is not. Avarice and greed," Keynes continues, "must be our gods for a little longer stage, for only they can lead us out of the tunnel of economic necessity into daylight." Keynes understands well that the foundations of the neo-liberal economy are immoral. But he says we "need" this immoral system for one century more. Well, it is difficult

to accept this statement. I am very impressed by this text because it is very clear, very frank, and a little cynical as well.

A universal option

I can now talk about the third word, "option." Some friends told me that maybe the word in English does not mean exactly what it means in Spanish; but at least, in both languages, option means a free decision. Some people think that only the non-poor must espouse the option for the poor. This is not true, because this option is a universal demand. Everyone, even the poor, must undertake the option for the poor; even though many poor people have already undertaken an option for the rich. I think this option for the poor is a very demanding way of expressing an option for other people. This is very difficult to accept.

Remember the parable of the Good Samaritan. It begins with the question, "Who is my neighbor?" "My" is the possessive of I, the first person. You also remember Jesus' question: "Who of these three was the neighbor of the wounded man?" and also the answer: the other, the wounded man, was the center. To become a neighbor is a process. I need to meet someone and let that person be my neighbor and also make myself a neighbor to that person. Becoming a "neighbor" is the result of action. We must go beyond our normal path, as did the Samaritan. This is the meaning of the tale. As you well know, for many people, the poor are culturally, socially, and geographically distant; however, they should be our neighbors. We need to meet the poor and, through this approach, become their neighbors. We often think that our neighbor is nearby, the closest person; but, this is not the Gospel approach. In the Gospel, the neighbor is the one who is distant and whom I make my neighbor as a result of my action.

It seems to me that, we may now be more sensitive than in the past to the situation of others. At the same time, it is difficult for many people to accept this "otherness." The poor, the insignificant, are the "others" because they are excluded from the mainstream of society.

Today, we are in the process of becoming two kinds of human beings on this planet: on one hand, we have people who enjoy the majority of the resources (the haves) and, on the other, there are people who are not considered useful (the have-nots). The process is not complete, but we are definitely headed in this direction.

That is why we need an ethics of solidarity. An important Jewish philosopher, Emmanuel Levinas, has written this matter eloquently. Based on Scripture, he states that the "other" comes first, as we saw in the parable of the Good Samaritan. For Levinas, the first philosophy is ethics, and I think it is a very demanding one. For Levinas and for Christians, the "other" is first because he or she is made in God's image. We should have the faith to recognize Jesus Christ in the face of the poor. To have a Christian perspective, we must have a very deep commitment to this ethics of solidarity. In one of the key texts in the Bible concerning Jubilee (Deuteronomy Chap. 15), it is written: "we must be open-handed with the poor sisters and brothers." This is exactly the idea of the Jubilee: to be open-handed, to love other people, and above all to recognize their condition as a great concern.

Conclusion: Preferential option for the poor as axis of Christian life

I would like to finish by returning to the title of this lecture. I have three final statements. First, the preferential option for the poor is a perspective *rooted in the Bible*. Karl Barth, a great theologian of this century, said the God of the Bible always takes sides with the lowly, the outcast, the poor. He said this not because he was reading a liberation theologian, but because he was reading the Bible and that was enough for him. We don't need to read liberation theology to learn this. It is in the core of the Christian message. You may ask why this expression, which today is so relevant, was not used before. Well, I think it was already present. But at the same time, you know, in the Church we sometimes have very curious eclipses. I remember, for example, when, just after the war (1945), a Belgian theologian, Father Gillman, published a book on moral theology, entitled "The Primacy of Charity in

Moral Theology.” It was then considered a revolution in moral studies because, for a long time, moral theology contained mainly formal prescriptions. After Gillman, a very different approach developed that shapes much of our moral theology today. Now, for sincere Christians, the primacy of charity is very obvious.

I think the preferential option for the poor is a very old perspective. We have not just discovered this. What we have done is to take a truth of the Bible and directly relate it to world poverty. If, by hypothesis, it were only an idea discovered in the 20th century, then the “preferential option for the poor” would not be Christian. We cannot wait 20 centuries to discover such a central point. It is impossible. The notion was present before in different ways. For example, it was present in the founders of many religious congregations. Those founders repeatedly remarked that we need to work with the poor; however, sometimes their followers forgot that vision. The example of Francis of Assisi is very clear, along with that of St. Dominic and many, many others.

Poverty was always a central point in the history of spirituality, and it was always linked to the contemplative life. In the present form, a preferential option for the poor is a central point in the experience and reflection of Latin American Christians. And it seems to me that the Jubilee is a good pre-text (in the sense of something before the text) to remember it, because it is a capital subject of the Jubilee. The poor are first, cries the whole Bible.

Second, the preferential option for the poor is certainly very important for our pastoral work and helps us always keep in mind the universality of the love of God. But it is also very important *in spirituality*. You are all familiar with Henri Nouwen; he is so good in spirituality. Henri was in my country and in Bolivia, 12 or 13 years ago, and he wrote a beautiful book concerning his trip. The name of Henri’s book is *Gracias: Journey in Bolivia and Perú*. Henri told me: “For years I was working in spirituality, but seeing the poverty here has convinced me that true Christian spirituality must have a commitment to the poor. For spirituality, the option for the poor is very important.”

The preferential option for the poor is also a way of doing theology because it is not the same as reading the Bible from a neutral point of view. In my opinion, the neutral point of view does not exist. A Christian must live his or her life from the perspective of the last ones; it is quite different. Today we see that the preferential option for the poor is central for many biblical scholars and theologians. This option is not only a pastoral issue, but a spiritual and theological one.

My third point was mentioned before. We are really challenged today to find the *face of Jesus Christ in the face of the poor*. You may remember that this idea is present in the document of Puebla, and in Santo Domingo too. It was put there by two bishops. We may say this now, almost 20 years after Puebla, because these two bishops are already dead. One was Leonidas Proaño, from Ecuador, an Indian bishop very close to the Ecuadorian Indians. The other one was a Peruvian, Herman Schmitz, bishop of Lima. Both holy people wrote at Puebla: "We must discover in the faces of the poor in Latin America the face of Jesus Christ." In the insignificant, we must find the significant God in our lives.

It seems to me that this is the meaning of the preferential option for the poor, and I think the preparation for the Jubilee is a very good framework to remember it. I am very surprised in the last few years to discover that the idea of preferential option for the poor, born in some small basic Christian communities in Latin America, is present in the universal church as well as in the Magisterium. We were speaking, some minutes before this lecture, of the important letter of the Catholic bishops of this country concerning economic issues (1985). They mentioned the preferential option for the poor as an important criterion to take into consideration. I think we therefore confront a very important point because it is not coming just from theology, it is coming from our Christian revelation. Thank you, my friends.

THE MARIANIST AWARD

Each year the University of Dayton presents the Marianist Award to a Roman Catholic distinguished for achievement in scholarship and the intellectual life.

Established in 1950, the award was originally presented to individuals who made outstanding contributions to Mariology. In 1967, the concept for the award was broadened to honor those people who had made outstanding contributions to humanity. The award, as currently given, was reactivated in 1986.

The Marianist Award is named for the founding religious order of the University of Dayton, the Society of Mary (Marianists). The award carries with it a stipend of \$5,000.

RECIPIENTS OF
THE MARIANIST AWARD

1950	Juniper Carol, O.F.M.
1951	Daniel A. Lord, S.J.
1952	Patrick Peyton, C.S.C.
1953	Roger Brien
1954	Emil Neubert, S.M.
1955	Joseph A. Skelly, C.M.
1956	Frank Duff
1957	John McShain Eugene F. Kennedy, Jr.
1958	Winifred A. Feely
1959	Bishop John F. Noll
1960	Eamon R. Carroll, O. Carm.
1961	Coley Taylor
1963	René Laurentin
1964	Philip C. Hoelle, S.M.
1965	Cyril O. Vollert, S.J.
1967	Eduardo Frei-Montalva
<hr/>	
1986	John Tracy Ellis
1987	Rosemary Haughton
1988	Timothy O'Meara
1989	Walter J. Ong, S.J.
1990	Sidney Callahan
1991	John T. Noonan, Jr.
1992	Louis Dupré
1993	Monika Hellwig
1994	Philip Gleason
1995	J. Bryan Hehir
1996	Charles Taylor
1997	Gustavo Gutiérrez

Requests for additional copies
of this or previous lectures may be made to
the Office of the President,
University of Dayton
Dayton, Ohio 45469-1624

A limited number of video tapes of this lecture are
available and can be requested from the
Office of the Rector
University of Dayton
Dayton, Ohio 45469-1624
(937) 229-4122
(937) 229-2009 FAX
contadino@udayton.edu

