

The Preferential Option for the Poor

Reflections from Saint Augustine

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The fourth principle of Catholic social teaching on the obligations of Christians in today's society is

We are called to emulate God by showing a special preference for those who are poor and weak.



The Gospel calls Christians to put the needs of the poor first. A common moral test of a society is how it treats its most vulnerable people.

Precisely because we wish to be at the service of all of society, our primary concern will always be those who live on its margin, excluded from the essential services. Wherever there is structural injustice, Christians are called to oppose it. Those with the greatest need require the greatest response.

God is Father of all, without exception, and we firmly believe in the equal dignity of all. It is this belief which commits us in faith to promote respect for the inalienable rights of all and their integration in society.

World Realities

Neglect of the poor, elderly, women and children; lack of affordable housing and medical care; a growing gap between impoverished and wealthy people, and between rich nations of the global north and the developing countries of the global south - these are world realities.

Coming down to practical and particularly urgent consequences, this (Vatican II) council lays stress on reverence for human beings; everyone must consider his every neighbor without exception as another self, taking into account first of all His life and the means necessary to living it with dignity, so as not to imitate the rich man who had no concern for the poor man Lazarus.

In our times a special obligation binds us to make ourselves the neighbor of every person without exception. and of actively helping him when he comes across our path, whether he be an old person abandoned by all, a foreign laborer unjustly looked down upon, a refugee, a child born of an unlawful union and wrongly suffering for a sin he did not commit, or a hungry person who disturbs our conscience by recalling the voice of the Lord, "As long as you did it for one of these the least of my brethren, you did it for me" (Matt. 25:40). Gaudium et Spes 27.

St. Augustine on the Preferential Option for the Poor

- *God does not demand much of you. He asks back what he gave you, and from him you take what is enough for you. The superfluities of the rich are the necessities of*

the poor. When you possess superfluities, you possess what belongs to others. (Exposition on Psalm 147, 12).

- *Christ who is rich in heaven chose to be hungry in the poor. Yet in your humanity you hesitate to give to your fellow human being. Don't you realize that what you give, you give to Christ, from whom you received whatever you have to give in the first place. (Commentary on Psalm 75,9)*
- *Whenever you did it for one of the least of mine, you did it for me. Christ has received what you have given; it has been received by the one who gave you the means to give it; it has been received by the one who at the end will give you himself. (Sermon 389,4)*
- *Go on making use of your special, expensive foods, because you have got into the habit of them, because if you change your habits you get sick. Go on making use of your superfluities, but give the poor their necessities. He looks to you, you look to God. He looks to a hand that was made as he was, you look to a hand that made you. But it didn't only make you, it also made the poor man with you. He gave you both this life as a single road to travel along. You have found yourselves companions, walking along the same road; he's carrying nothing, you have an excessive load. He's carrying nothing with him, you are carrying more than you need. You are overloaded; give him some of what you've got. At a stroke, you feed him and lessen your load. So give to the poor; I'm begging you, I'm warning you, I'm commanding you, I'm ordering you. Give to the poor whatever you like. (Sermon 389,5-6)*
- *You give bread to a hungry person; but it would be better were no one hungry, and you could give it to no one. You clothe the naked person. Would that all were clothed and this necessity did not exist. (Tractate 1 John 8,8)*
- *Do you think it's a small matter that you are eating someone else's food? Listen to the apostle: We brought nothing into this world. You have come into the world, you have found a full table spread for you. But the Lord's is the earth and its fullness. God bestows the world on the poor, he bestows it on the rich. (Sermon 29, 2)*

Here we can see Bishop Augustine's continual worry about the poorest of his community. He even reached the point of selling the sacred goblets in order to help them and would constantly intercede for them.

As a "beggar for the beggars" (Serm. 66,8), Augustine would almost always include the same words at the end of his homilies: "give to the poor" (Serm. 61,13), "think of the poor" (Serm. 25,8; Serm. 122,6), "give to the poor what you have gathered" (Serm. 66,5).

To give, to share, is necessary for the one who wishes to live not only justice, but also love.

It is here that we see the religious sense of the sharing of goods, another very important point in the thought of Augustine. Just as greed is united to an attitude of disbelief-- as is the case of the rich man (Serm. 41,4 ss.), mercy is the expression of a faith that knows how to intuit how God nourishes us and also wants to feed the poor through us (Serm. 39,4).

The genius of Augustine discovers in Mt. 25 amazingly until what point God is inseparable from the poor and with what clarity this relationship is put forth as the only and definitive criterion for salvation (Serm. 389,5).

Alms-giving, therefore, for Augustine is mercy, justice, love....:being a Christian. Not to turn away from the empty bellies of the poor (Serm. 36,9) is equivalent to the fundamental attitude of fraternity and justice demanded by the Gospel.

The basis of all the aforementioned teaching can be found, as always in Saint Augustine, in a deep Christological and ecclesiological reason: Christ became poor and is in the poor, who are his members in the Body of the Church.

Christ is at once rich and poor: as God, rich; as a human person, poor. Truly, that Man rose to heaven already rich, and now sits at the right hand of the Father, but here, among us, he still suffers hunger, thirst and nakedness: here he is poor and is in the poor. (Serm. 123,4).

--Adapted from the International Augustinian Secretariate for Justice and Peace Bulletin