

Faith demands commitment to the poor

By Dr. Patricia Schoelles, SSJ
Courier columnist

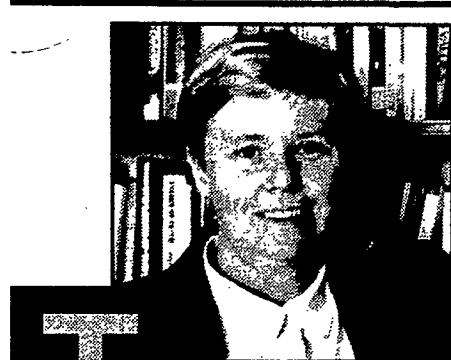
Today we sometimes hear a curious phrase in relation to religion and social justice. The phrase I refer to is "the preferential option for the poor." This term has only been in use in our North American church for a short time; it comes to us from the Latin American church.

It is an odd-sounding term, and its meaning is not immediately clear. I have heard it used in a number of ways and think it might be interesting to explore some of the ways we hear it used today.

The bishops of the United States used the phrase in their 1986 pastoral letter titled: "Economic Justice for All: Catholic Social Teaching and the U.S. Economy." This letter was our bishops' attempt to address the uneven economic opportunities available to U.S. citizens as our nation shifts to a post-industrial economy.

A touchstone theme in the letter is the major criterion the bishops raised for measuring U.S. economic policy. According to our bishops, what economic decisions do for the poor and to the poor — and how such decisions enable the poorest among us to do for themselves — should be the guiding principle for judging and shaping our economy.

In article 24 of their letter, the bishops wrote: "The fundamental moral criterion for all economic decisions,



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policies, and institutions is this: They must be at the service of all people, especially the poor."

This statement shows one application of the phrase "preferential option for the poor." The poor are to be given special preference in the decisions and policies enacted by society. These decisions affect every strata of society, but it is their effect on the poorest among us that should determine whether or not they are implemented.

But there is another use of this phrase. In this second use, the phrase applies to God and takes on a more general religious meaning. In this second sense, the phrase refers to God's preferential option for the poor. This

intended meaning is based on an interpretation of Scripture that finds God's central activity to be located among the poor of history.

In the Exodus story, for example, God actually bypasses Pharaoh and the social and economic powers of the day in God's effort to free Israel. God approaches Moses, a poor shepherd who stutters so badly that he asks God to work with his brother instead. It is through Moses that God works to liberate the poor Israelites from their oppression at the hands of the powerful Egyptians.

In this interpretation of the Exodus story, the poor are not just the beneficiaries of God's action in history. They are the locus of that activity. God is seen as active in the struggle of the Israelites to remove the yoke of affliction that oppresses them.

Building on this interpretation, the preferential option for the poor indicates that God's activity in the human history is centered particularly in the struggle of the poor and oppressed peoples of every age to remove the barriers that keep them from freedom and liberation. Again, the poor are not just the beneficiaries of God's loving activity, they are the locus of that activity. If we want to know "what God is up to," we'll check out the struggles of the poorest among us, and that will be our key to knowing what God is doing in history.

This second use of the phrase "preferential option for the poor" is prob-

ably even more challenging to us than is the first. Gustavo Gutierrez, a well-known Peruvian theologian, stresses the fact that: "We must be committed to the poor, not necessarily because they are good, but because God is good. God always takes the side of the lowly. As Bishop Desmond Tutu said ... 'God is not neutral.'"

Pope John Paul II has said a great deal about this also. In a 1980 address, for example, he proclaimed: "The poor are, in fact, God's favorites." In his 1987 encyclical, "On Social Concern," Pope John Paul advanced the "moral and social attitude" and even the virtue of solidarity. By this term he meant far more than just a feeling of compassion and an occasional gesture on behalf of poor people.

Instead, the pope used this term to call Catholics to a "firm and persevering determination to commit oneself to the common good" and to the rights of the poor. Those who are better off are called to stand with the poor in their own use of power and wealth, and to recognize that God wills the liberation of the poor and oppressed.

These words from "the churches of Latin America and Rome" are challenging to us North Americans, and to the individualism and selfishness that can sometimes become public ideology in our country. The "preferential option for the poor" says something about what God is doing, and what God is inviting us to do with Him.

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