



With Head, Heart, Hands & Feet

A Framework for Educating for Justice & Peace

“OPTING FOR THE POOR IN CATHOLIC EDUCATION”

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"Educational programs must open eyes, touch hearts and move hands in response to poverty."

Those who contribute five dollars get to name the baby!" To this day I remember well that tantalizing promise made many years ago when I was attending St. Patrick's Parish Grammar School in Tacoma, Washington. When we contributed our money to help missionaries baptize and educate "poor pagan babies," we believed we were doing our part to improve the world.

How many poor Chinese babies named "Patrick" or "Mary" grew up to become Communist Red Guard members, I don't know! But I do know that, having experienced the campaigns to "buy pagan babies" (however theologically unenlightened these campaigns might have been), I grew up to appreciate the strong missionary dimension of my Christian faith.

Clearly, this meant sharing with others the good news that had been shared with me.

And central to that dimension is what we today call "the option for the poor."

Meaning of the option

What does this option mean and what are its implications for the work of Catholic educational institutions in the United States?

Basically, the option for the poor means following Jesus in his identification with the poor (Mt. 25:31-46), in his proclamation of good news for the poor (Lk 4:14 -21), in his challenge to those who hold positions of power (Mk.10: 42-45), in his respect for the poor and lowly (Lk21: 1-4) and in his work for a kingdom of justice for the poor (Mt 11:4-6).

It is a choice, an orientation, a stance on the side of the materially disadvantaged and economically deprived who, as a consequence of their poverty, are powerless, oppressed and marginalized. At root, it is a religious option, but it has very practical political consequences.

While the phrase "option for the poor" is of fairly recent origin, its foundation is as old as the Scriptures. The God of Israel showed special concern for the poor and took up their cause (Ps103: 6; Prv. 22:22-23). These "anawim" were the little ones, the widows, orphans and strangers whom God

protected (Dt. 10:18). That is why the prophets spoke so sharply against the oppression of the poor and weak by the rich and the powerful (Is. 3:24-15; Am. 2:6-7).

Jesus continued the prophetic tradition when he challenged the rich who ignored the needy around them (Lk 6:24, 16:19-31; Mt 19:21). The early Christian community cared for the poor by sharing their goods among all those in need (Acts 4:34-35). The deeper meaning and wider application of the option for the poor has been clearly put forth in recent documents of the church's social teaching. Some Catholics mistakenly think this concern applies only to Latin America (even with a "Marxist" emphasis). But it was John XXIII who opened the Second Vatican Council in 1962 with the reminder that the church desired in a special way to be the "church of the poor."

The great decree of the council, *The Church in the Modern World*, states that it is "especially those who are poor and in any way oppressed" to whom the followers of Jesus must pay attention.

John Paul II, in his 1988 letter *On Social Concern*, speaks explicitly of the option for the poor as a priority "to which the whole tradition of the church bears witness." The pope likes to speak of this option as a 'love of preference for the poor," and he repeats this theme in his writings and speeches around the world.

The Catholic bishops of the United States, in their 1986 pastoral letter *Economic Justice for All*, used this option as the criteria by which any economic decision should be evaluated: "Decisions must be judged in light of what they do for the poor, what they do to the poor and what they enable the poor to do for themselves." The bishops reiterated this emphasis in their 1996 poster "A Catholic Framework for Economic Life," saying: "A fundamental moral measure of any economy is how the poor and vulnerable are faring."

Important clarifications

This option for the poor is central both to the Scriptures and to the church's social teaching. In responding to its strong challenge, several points should be understood, especially if we consider its implications for Catholic educational institutions.

Economic disadvantage. The "poor" are those who are economically disadvantaged. I believe we should limit the word to its material meaning and not speak about the "spiritually" poor, the "psychologically" poor, the "culturally" poor and so on.

Surely many people have spiritual, psychological, cultural and many other kinds of needs--and surely they should be assisted! But calling everybody who needs assistance "poor" obscures the issue. How can we speak of a "preferential" option if we give "preference" or priority to everyone?

Preferential option. There is an important distinction between a "preferential" option and an "exclusive" option. Opting for the poor does not mean that the church will turn its back on anyone who is not economically poor. The church will continue to minister to the non-poor in their needs, for they genuinely deserve such service.

But a preference of understanding, of concern, of commitment and of consideration will be given to those who do not enjoy, the material blessings of a decent livelihood. This preference reflects God's special concern and such a preference requires action.

Kinds of action. It follows from the previous point that the action taken will be of at least two kinds: direct service to those who suffer poverty, and indirect service aimed at the transformation of attitudes and structures that perpetuate poverty.

An example of the first would be education services offered at low costs to the poor in inner-city areas in the United States. An example of the second would be educational programs directed toward the non-poor to inform them about the problems and causes of poverty and to motivate them to take actions in addressing these causes.

Political action is required for the transformation of structures. That is why I emphasized earlier that the religious option for the poor has practical political consequences. Concern for poor immigrants, legal and/ or illegal, in the United States today, for instance, will move us to examine the justice of immigration legislation and work to change any discriminatory, unfair laws.

An option for the poor implies involvement in the Struggle to transform society with greater justice, more respect for human rights and deeper concern for the environment. We do not take the place of the poor, but we struggle alongside them in the work for social justice.

Implications for education

If we take seriously these points about the option for the poor, we find obvious implications for Catholic education in the United States. Catholic-sponsored institutions are unquestionably a major contributor to improving educational standards among the inner-city poor, as many recent studies indicate. This has been a blessing from and for the church.

But what of the students from non-poor backgrounds who attend Catholic-sponsored institutions? What does the schools' option for the poor mean for these students?

It must mean that the instruction they receive in Catholic schools and programs will open their eyes, touch their hearts and move their hands in response to the tremendous problems of poverty nationally and globally. When we speak of the problems of poverty, we must remember we are talking of John and Mary, of our sisters and brothers. In a rich nation where one out of four preschoolers grows up in poverty, and in an interdependent world where nearly 40,000 children die each day of hunger, the poor are not mere statistics but real people with names and faces.

Catholic schools that truly educate students about poverty – its dimensions, causes and consequences – are fulfilling their option for the poor. They are affecting the way their graduates vote for candidates, follow professional vocations, pay wages to workers, raise families.

Since poverty is so closely linked to racism and sexism, these issues also must be addressed in the schools, both in the curriculum and in the school climate.

For example, the shocking "feminization of poverty" (the fact that the majority of the poor are women and children dependent on women) calls for greater commitment in Catholic schools to reaching respect for the equality of women and to promoting their participation in decision-making roles in our church and society.

Expectations for the future

In the 1970s and 1980s, I lived in inner city Washington, D.C., and saw the real work done by Catholic schools there in directly serving the poor. Having lived now for many years in Zambia, one of the poorest countries of Africa, my hope is that the schools' option for the poor in the, United States will also indirectly serve the African people.

This will come about by committing today's students to a political stance, a lifestyle and a spiritual sensitivity that will build greater global justice in the years ahead.

Catholic schools no longer have the old-fashioned campaigns that encourage children to "buy poor pagan babies." Instead, we promote in a variety of ways the option for the poor. We cannot offer students the chance to give poor baby a name, but we can offer them a chance to save that baby's life through the works of justice in our own nation and around the world. After all, all of these poor children already carry the prototype of their condition in their hearts: his name is Jesus.

i See Peter J. Henriot, *Opting for the Poor: A Challenge for North Americans*, Washington, DC Center of Concern, 1990.

ii "The Church in the Modern World," *The Documents of Vatican II*, Walter M. Abbott, ed., Boston, MA, The American Press, 1966.

iii John Paul II, "On Social Concerns", *Origins*, vol. 17, March 3, 1988.

iv "Economic justice for All: Pastoral Letter on Catholic Social Teaching and the U.S. Economy," *Pastoral Letters of the United States Catholic Bishops, Volume V, 1983-1988*, Washington, DC United States Catholic Conference, 1989, #24.

v "A Catholic Framework for Economic Life," Washington, DC United States Catholic Conference 1966, #3.