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Gustavo Gutierrez and the preferential option for the poor

by John Dear

On the Road to Peace

"I hope my life tries to give testimony to the message of the Gospel, above all that God loves the world and loves those who are poorest within it."

That's the recent summation of his life by 83-year-old Peruvian theologian Gustavo Gutierrez, founder of liberation theology and its central tenet, "the preferential option for the poor."

These days, Gutierrez works and writes at Notre Dame, where his colleague, my friend Fr. Daniel Groody, has just completed an excellent anthology of his work: *Gustavo Gutierrez: Spiritual Writings* (Orbis Books, 2011). Gutierrez reminds us of God's preferential love for the poor and our own need to side with the poor and oppressed everywhere in their struggle for justice.

Gutierrez's groundbreaking work, *A Theology of Liberation*, published in 1971, changed everything. It seemed to chart a whole new course for the church, not just for Latin America, but everywhere. Vatican II challenged scholars to renew their theology and biblical study. Gutierrez responded by examining our concept of God and the scriptures within the Latin American reality of extreme poverty and systemic injustice. That led to a renewed realization of Christ's presence among the poor and oppressed, especially in their struggle to end poverty and oppression.

In his introduction, Groody reviews Gutierrez's three bottom-line principles about life and death at the bottom. First, material poverty is never good but an evil to be opposed. "It is not simply an occasion for charity but a degrading force that denigrates human dignity and ought to be opposed and rejected."

Second, poverty is not a result of fate or laziness, but is due to structural injustices that privilege some

while marginalizing others. "Poverty is not inevitable; collectively the poor can organize and facilitate social change."

Third, poverty is a complex reality and is not limited to its economic dimension. To be poor is to be insignificant. Poverty means an early and unjust death.

An early and unjust death. I remember hearing Gutierrez say those words at a talk I attended at Maryknoll in 1984. The following year, while living in El Salvador, I remember Jon Sobrino using the same expression. Most people in history suffer "early and unjust deaths," they said. When they wake up, they know that because of poverty, they may die before the day is over. That is the greatest injustice, they insist.

Gandhi put it this way: poverty is the greatest form of violence.

When Jesus said "Blessed are the poor," Gutierrez points out, he does not say, "Blessed is poverty." For Gutierrez, "Standing in solidarity *with* the poor began to mean taking a stand *against* inhumane poverty." Groody explains:

Gutierrez makes distinctions between material poverty, voluntary poverty and spiritual poverty. Real poverty means privation, or the lack of goods necessary to meet basic human needs. It means inadequate access to education, health care, public services, living wages, and discrimination because of culture, race or gender. Gutierrez reiterates that such poverty is evil; it is a subhuman condition in which the majority of humanity lives today, and it poses a major challenge to every Christian conscience and therefore to spirituality and theological reflection.

Spiritual poverty is about a radical openness to the will of God, a radical faith in a providential God, and a radical trust in a loving God. It is also known as spiritual childhood, from which flows the renunciation of material goods. Relinquishing possessions comes from a desire to be more possessed by God alone and to love and serve God more completely.

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Voluntary poverty is a conscious protest against injustice by choosing to live together with those who are materially poor. Its inspiration comes from the life of Jesus who entered into solidarity with the human condition in order to help human beings overcome the sin that enslaves and impoverishes them. Voluntary poverty affirms that Christ came to live as a poor person not because poverty itself has any intrinsic value but to criticize and challenge those people and systems that oppress the poor and compromise their God-given dignity. It involves more than detachment, because the point is not to love poverty but to love the poor.

The Christian sides with the world's poor, Gutierrez teaches, consciously acknowledging the forces of greed, violence and death that crush them. The Christian sees Christ present in the poor and marginalized, and joins their struggle to end poverty.

"A spirituality of liberation will center on a conversion to the neighbor, the oppressed person, the exploited social class, the despised ethnic group, the dominated country," Gutierrez writes. "Our conversion to the Lord implies this conversion to the neighbor. To be converted is to commit oneself lucidly, realistically, and concretely to the process of the liberation of the poor and oppressed."

Gutierrez writes:

Christians have not done enough in this area of conversion to the neighbor, to social justice, to history. They have not perceived clearly enough yet that to know God is to do justice. They have yet to tread the path that will lead them to seek effectively the peace of the Lord in the heart of social struggle.

Reading his theological reflections, I was deeply moved by Gutierrez's insistence on "the gratuitousness of God" as the basis for his liberation theology. Everything in life comes from the lavish, universal love of God, he insists. The best way to understand this gratuitous love of God is to see God's love for the poor and oppressed and to make that same love central to our own lives.

"We have been made by love and for love," Gutierrez writes. "Only by loving can we fulfill ourselves as persons; that is, [by responding] to the initiative taken by God's love. God's love for us is gratuitous; we do not merit it. It is a gift we receive before we exist, or, to be more accurate, a gift in view of which we have been created. Gratuitousness thus marks our lives so that we are led to love gratuitously and to want to be loved gratuitously.

"The preferential option for the poor is much more than a way of showing our concern about poverty and the establishment of justice. At its very heart, it contains a spiritual, mystical element, an experience of gratuitousness that gives it depth and fruitfulness. This is not to deny the social concern expressed in this solidarity, the rejection of injustice and oppression that it implies, but to see that in the last resort it is anchored in our faith in the God of Jesus Christ. It is therefore not surprising that this option has been adorned by the martyr's witness of so many, as it has by the daily generous self-sacrifice of so many more who by coming close to the poor set foot on the path to holiness.

"Clearly the gratuitousness of God's love challenges the patterns we have become used to," Gutierrez writes. "The Bartimaeuses of this world have stopped being at the side of the road. They have jumped up and come to the Lord, their lifelong friend. Their presence may upset the old followers of Jesus, who spontaneously, and with the best reasons in the world, begin to defend their privileges."

Those of us who are privileged First World North Americans may bristle at this theology that asks them to let go of their privileges, make that option for the poor and seek Christ in their struggle for justice. But Gutierrez assures us that this movement of the Spirit among us not only hastens God's reign of justice and peace, beginning with those in extreme poverty, it leads to new blessings. This is good news. We, too, are being liberated!

"To make an option for the poor," Gutierrez writes, "is to make an option for Jesus." That ultimately is the spiritual basis for our solidarity with the poor. We opt to be with Jesus, to serve Jesus, to accompany Jesus among the world's poor in the nonviolent struggle for justice.

Gutierrez reminds us that a key aspect of Christian life is to make a preferential option for the poor and oppressed. Reading him leads us to ask: How are we doing this today in our lives? How can the church more and more side with the poor? How can we support their struggle for justice and peace?

This week, newly released figures suggest that almost 50 million U.S. citizens live below the poverty line, which is set at \$22,400 annually for a family of four. Globally, the United Nations put the number of poor people in the billions. And the number continues to grow. Certainly, one billion people on the planet live in extreme poverty, without adequate food, water, housing, healthcare, education, employment or dignity. Such poverty is not God's will, and needs to be fought and resisted.

Many unsung faithful serve Christ in the poor through this liberating work, this war on poverty. From Latin America to Africa to the Middle East to our own growing "Occupy Wall Street" movement, people are choosing to opt not for the corporations, or the war industry or big money, but for the struggling masses, our sisters and brothers who suffer needlessly under the weight of global injustice.

Gutierrez reminds us that the Gospel calls each of us to join this campaign of liberation, to do our part in the struggle for justice and peace. I recommend this collection of Gustavo Gutierrez's work hoping it will encourage others to renew solidarity with Christ among the poor and carry on the campaign to abolish hunger and poverty.

John Dear's new book, *Lazarus, Come Forth!*, is available from Amazon.com. Next year, John will undertake a national book tour to discuss this Gospel confrontation of the God of life and peace against the culture of death and war. To host John for an evening talk, send an email through his website. His other recent books, including *Daniel Berrigan: Essential Writings*; *Put Down Your Sword* and *A Persistent Peace*, are also available from Amazon.com. To contribute to Catholic Relief Services' "Fr. John Dear Haiti Fund," go to: donate.crs.org/goto/fatherjohn. For more information, go to John Dear's website.

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