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Gutierrez and Farmer's 'In the Company of the Poor'

by John Dear

On the Road to Peace

So many voices these days uphold the "rights" of multinational corporations; defend the billionaire 1 percent and their weapons; actively obstruct free health care for those who need it; legitimate drone strikes, bombing raids and extrajudicial assassinations; ignore Fukushima, the BP spill and catastrophic climate change; and support the unjust status quo of global systemic injustice. On top of that, few even mention the voiceless 3 billion people stuck in the deadly systems of extreme poverty.

This week, Orbis Books has published *In the Company of the Poor: Conversations with Dr. Paul Farmer and Fr. Gustavo Gutierrez* (edited by Michael Griffin and Jennie Weiss Block), a collection of essays and conversations by perhaps the world's two greatest Christian lifelong advocates for the poor and marginalized: Gustavo Gutierrez and Paul Farmer. I've been sitting with it for days and feel renewed by these serious thinkers and practitioners and their Gospel vision. I highly recommend it.

Fr. Gustavo Gutierrez is perhaps our greatest living theologian. A Dominican priest in his 80s, he is the founder of liberation theology and the author of many classic works such as *A Theology of Liberation*, *We Drink from Our Own Wells* and *On Job*. He continues to teach part time at Notre Dame and work part time in the slums of Peru. Though right-wing church officials have condemned his Gospel vision of solidarity and liberation for the poor, he has continued to live and teach that Gospel vision. His humility, clarity and wisdom are disarming and inspiring.

Dr. Paul Farmer is the world's most well-known medical doctor who advocates for the poor. His Gospel vision has introduced public health care for the poor into every medical school in the world and real, state-of-the-art health care to the poor in Haiti, Rwanda, Peru and elsewhere. *Mountains Beyond Mountains*, the award-winning biography of Paul, brought global attention to Paul and his nonprofit organization, Partners in Health. Paul has authored several bestsellers himself, most recently a massive study about life

in Haiti after the earthquake.

When Paul founded Partners in Health in 1987, he used Gustavo Gutierrez's teaching as the basis for their mission statement, "to provide a preferential option for the poor in health care." Today, Paul teaches part time at Harvard and lives part time in Haiti and Rwanda, where he helps direct national health care. I've known Paul since we were teenagers, living in the same fraternity at Duke in the 1970s. Even as kids, we all knew Paul was a genius.

Now with the help of editors Griffin and Block, these two Christian visionaries and practitioners have been brought together to share their insights, wisdom, convictions and experience about the preferential option for the poor, health care for the poorest, living the Gospel within the global systems of injustice, and working for social and economic justice.

"The Gutierrez/Farmer moral imagination shares four concrete expressions," the editors write in their introduction. "First, a lifelong commitment to accompany the poor in their daily struggles; second, raising a prophetic voice in the public square -- no matter what the cost; third, integrating theory and praxis; and fourth, building up the Kingdom of God in the here and now."

In the Company of the Poor begins with Paul's tribute to Gutierrez and is followed by an essay on suffering and injustice from Gutierrez where he insists that spirituality involves the praxis of putting into action the faith we have in Jesus' proclamation of a new world. Next, Paul shares stories about bringing health care to the poor, then Gutierrez offers a theological meditation on conversion in our own lives as we pursue solidarity, social justice and gratuitous love.

Paul offers a brilliant response to Gutierrez in an essay called "Conversion in a Time of Cholera," where he links conversion to broader concepts of social change. Paul insists the dismantling of concepts of social and political structures that perpetuate poverty requires conversion of both the people and the institutions that created them as well as those who study them. Gutierrez then reflects on following Jesus as the key to our preferential option for the poor. The book concludes with the transcript of an inspiring public conversation between the two from a recent event at Notre Dame.

"What I learned from Gutierrez above all was that hermeneutics was praxis," Paul writes. "He taught me to look for the hermeneutics of hope that might follow the hermeneutics of generosity which I'd sought to extend to my hosts in Haiti. Liberation theology continues to be, for me, an inexhaustible font of inspiration. I see the spirituality associated with it as, at the very least, aspirational: any of us can aspire to be better -- but only if we seek to attack contemporary poverty and to remember that we live in one world, not three. Nothing that I've seen, from plague to famine to flood to quake, could persuade me otherwise."

"As Dr. Farmer knows better than most, poverty for billions on this planet means an early death," Gutierrez writes. "We need to be clear, then, that poverty is an evil."

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"I do theology as one who comes from a context of deep poverty, and thus for me, the first question of theology is how do we say to the poor: 'God loves you'?" Gutierrez writes. "The preferential option for the poor ... displays the universality of God's love for all -- a love that, in a world structured to the benefit of the powerful, extends even to the least among us. In fact, Jesus shows us that God's love is clearest there. Like a mother who tends most tenderly to the weakest and threatened of her children, so it is with God's care for the poor.

"The call of the gospel is for us to do the same," Gutierrez continues, "to make the same option, to show that God's love is universal by focusing our attention on the most threatened among us. Only when we opt preferentially for the poorest and weakest can we even begin to display universality -- anything less is tainted with the exclusive ways of present social structures. But God's way -- placing the poor first among all -- makes clear to us how un-universal our love often is."

"To be Christians, we must follow Jesus by walking with the poor," Gutierrez tells Paul and the rest of us in their concluding dialogue. "To do the will of God, it is not enough to say, 'Lord, Lord' [as Jesus instructs in the Sermon on the Mount, Mt. 7:21]. We must live in praxis as persons walking toward the kingdom of God."

Such insights run throughout these reflections and will help us to better follow Jesus in solidarity with the world's poor and in pursuit of the kingdom of God. *In the Company of the Poor* is a significant addition to liberation theology and deserves our full attention.

Thank you, Gustavo and Paul, for your brave lives in the company of the poor, and for sharing your wisdom with the rest of us.

[John Dear's new book, *The Nonviolent Life*, is now available at paceebene.org and Amazon.com. Next year, John will undertake a national book tour. To see John's speaking schedule, to invite him to speak in your church or peace group, or to join his work with Campaign Nonviolence, go to his website or contact the Franciscan-based peace group Pace e Bene. John's book *Lazarus, Come Forth!* and other recent books, including *Daniel Berrigan: Essential Writings, Put Down Your Sword* and *A Persistent Peace*, are available from Amazon.com.]

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