



## CHAPTER FOUR A HISTORY THAT CONTINUES

### *The century of the Church's Social Doctrine*

82. The acceleration of technological and social change in the past two centuries, with all its contradictions and conflicts, not only had an impact on the lives of the poor but also became the object of debate and reflection on their part. The various movements of workers, women and young people, and the fight against racial discrimination, gave rise to a new appreciation of the dignity of those on the margins of society. The Church's social doctrine also emerged from this matrix. Its analysis of Christian revelation in the context of modern social, labor, economic and cultural issues would not have been possible without the contribution of the laity, men and women alike, who grappled with the great issues of their time. At their side were those men and women religious who embodied a Church forging ahead in new directions. The epochal change we are now undergoing makes even more necessary a constant interaction between the faithful and the Church's Magisterium, between ordinary citizens and experts, between individuals and institutions. Here too, it needs to be acknowledged once more that reality is best viewed from the sidelines, and that the poor are possessed of unique insights indispensable to the Church and to humanity as a whole.

83. The Church's Magisterium in the past 150 years is a veritable treasury of significant teachings concerning the poor. The Bishops of Rome have given voice to new insights refined through a process of ecclesial discernment. By way of example, in his Encyclical Letter Rerum Novarum, Leo XIII addressed the labor question, pointing to the intolerable living conditions of many industrial workers and arguing for the establishment of a just social order. Other popes also spoke on this theme. Saint John XXIII, in his Encyclical Mater et Magistra (1961), called for justice on a global scale: rich countries could no longer remain indifferent to countries suffering from hunger and extreme poverty; instead, they were called upon to assist them generously with all their goods.

84. The Second Vatican Council represented a milestone in the Church's understanding of the poor in God's saving plan. Although this theme remained marginal in the preparatory documents, Saint John XXIII, in his Radio Message of 11 September 1962, a month before the opening of the Council, called attention to the issue. In his memorable words, "the Church presents herself as she is and as she wishes to be: the Church of all and in particular the Church of the poor." [76] The intense efforts of bishops, theologians and experts concerned with the renewal of the Church — with the support of Saint John XXIII himself — gave the Council a new direction. The centrality of Christ in these considerations both on a doctrinal and social level would prove fundamental. Many Council Fathers supported this approach, as eloquently expressed by Cardinal Lercaro in his intervention of 6 December 1962: "The mystery of Christ in the Church has always been and today is, in a particular way, the mystery of Christ in the poor." [77] He went on to say that, "this is not simply one theme among others, but in some sense the only theme of the Council as a whole." [78] The Archbishop of Bologna, in preparing the text for this intervention, noted the following: "This is the hour of the poor, of the millions of the poor throughout the world. This is the hour of the mystery of the Church as mother of the poor. This is the hour of the mystery of Christ, present especially in the poor." [79] There was a growing sense of the need for a new image of Church, one simpler and more sober, embracing the entire people of God and its presence in history. A Church more closely resembling her Lord than worldly powers and working to foster a concrete commitment on the part of all humanity to solving the immense problem of poverty in the world.

85. At the opening of the second session of the Council, Saint Paul VI took up this concern voiced by his predecessor, namely that the Church looks with particular attention "to the poor, the needy, the afflicted,



the hungry, the suffering, the imprisoned, that is, she looks to all humanity that suffers and weeps: she is part of them by evangelical right.” [80] In his General Audience of 11 November 1964, he pointed out that “the poor are representatives of Christ,” and compared the image of the Lord in the poor to that seen in the Pope. He affirmed this truth with these words: “The representation of Christ in the poor is universal; every poor person reflects Christ; that of the Pope is personal... The poor man and Peter can be one in the same person, clothed in a double representation; that of poverty and that of authority.” [81] In this way, the intrinsic link between the Church and the poor was expressed symbolically and with unprecedented clarity.

86. The Pastoral Constitution *Gaudium et Spes*, building on the teachings of the Church Fathers, forcefully reaffirms the universal destination of earthly goods and the social function of property that derives from it. The Constitution states that “God destined the earth and all it contains for all people and nations so that all created things would be shared fairly by all humankind under the guidance of justice tempered by charity... In their use of things people should regard the external goods they lawfully possess as not just their own but common to others as well, in the sense that they can benefit others as well as themselves. Therefore, everyone has the right to possess a sufficient amount of the earth’s goods for themselves and their family... Persons in extreme necessity are entitled to take what they need from the riches of others... By its nature, private property has a social dimension that is based on the law of the common destination of earthly goods. Whenever the social aspect is forgotten, ownership can often become the object of greed and a source of serious disorder.” [82] This conviction was reiterated by Saint Paul VI in his Encyclical *Populorum Progressio*. There we read that no one can feel authorized to “appropriate surplus goods solely for his [or her] own private use when others lack the bare necessities of life.” [83] In his address to the United Nations, Pope Paul VI spoke as the advocate of poor peoples [84] and urged the international community to build a world of solidarity.

87. With Saint John Paul II, the Church’s preferential relationship with the poor was consolidated, particularly from a doctrinal standpoint. His teaching saw in the option for the poor a “special form of primacy in the exercise of Christian charity, to which the whole tradition of the Church bears witness.” [85] In his Encyclical *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis*, he went on to say: “Today, furthermore, given the worldwide dimension which the social question has assumed, this love of preference for the poor, and the decisions which it inspires in us, cannot but embrace the immense multitudes of the hungry, the needy, the homeless, those without medical care and, above all, those without hope of a better future. It is impossible not to take account of the existence of these realities. To ignore them would mean becoming like the ‘rich man’ who pretended not to know the beggar Lazarus lying at his gate (cf. *Lk* 16:19-31).” [86] Saint John Paul II’s teaching on work is likewise important for our consideration of the active role that the poor ought to play in the renewal of the Church and society, thus leaving behind a certain “paternalism” that limited itself to satisfying only the immediate needs of the poor. In his Encyclical *Laborem Exercens*, he forthrightly stated that “human work is a key, probably the essential key, to the whole social question.” [87]

88. Amid the multiple crises that marked the beginning of the third millennium, the teaching of Benedict XVI took a more distinctly political turn. Hence, in the Encyclical *Caritas in Veritate*, he affirms that “the more we strive to secure a common good corresponding to the real needs of our neighbors, the more effectively we love them.” [88] He observed, moreover, that “hunger is not so much dependent on lack of material things as on shortage of social resources, the most important of which are institutional. What is missing, in other words, is a network of economic institutions capable of guaranteeing regular access to sufficient food and water for nutritional needs, and also capable of addressing the primary needs and necessities ensuing from genuine food crises, whether due to natural causes or political irresponsibility, nationally and internationally.” [89]



89. Pope Francis recognized that in recent decades, alongside the teachings of the Bishops of Rome, national and regional Bishops' Conferences have increasingly spoken out. He could personally attest, for example, to the particular commitment of the Latin American episcopate to rethinking the Church's relationship with the poor. In the immediate post-conciliar period, in almost all Latin American countries, there was a strong sense of the Church's need to identify with the poor and to participate actively in securing their freedom. The Church was moved by the masses of the poor suffering from unemployment, underemployment, unjust wages and sub-standard living conditions. The martyrdom of Saint Oscar Romero, the Archbishop of San Salvador, was a powerful witness and an inspiration for the Church. He had made his own the plight of the vast majority of his flock and made them the center of his pastoral vision. The Conferences of the Latin American Bishops held in Medellín, Puebla, Santo Domingo and Aparecida were also significant events for the life of the Church as a whole. For my part, having served as a missionary in Peru for many years, I am greatly indebted to this process of ecclesial discernment, which Pope Francis wisely linked to that of other particular Churches, especially those in the global South. I would now like to take up two specific themes of this episcopal teaching.

*Structures of sin that create poverty and extreme inequality*

90. At Medellín, the bishops declared themselves in favor of a preferential option for the poor: "Christ our Savior not only loved the poor, but, 'being rich, he became poor.' He lived a life of poverty, focused his mission on preaching their liberation, and founded his Church as a sign of this poverty in our midst... The poverty endured by so many of our brothers and sisters cries out for justice, solidarity, witness, commitment and efforts directed to ending it, so that the saving mission entrusted by Christ may be fully accomplished." [90] The bishops stated forcefully that the Church, to be fully faithful to her vocation, must not only share the condition of the poor, but also stand at their side and work actively for their integral development. Faced with a situation of worsening poverty in Latin America, the Puebla Conference confirmed the Medellín decision in favor of a frank and prophetic option for the poor and described structures of injustice as a "social sin."

91. Charity has the power to change reality; it is a genuine force for change in history. It is the source that must inspire and guide every effort to "resolve the structural causes of poverty," [91] and to do so with urgency. It is my hope that we will see more and more "politicians capable of sincere and effective dialogue aimed at healing the deepest roots — and not simply the appearances — of the evils in our world." [92] For "it is a matter of hearing the cry of entire peoples, the poorest peoples of the earth." [93]

92. We must continue, then, to denounce the "dictatorship of an economy that kills," and to recognize that "while the earnings of a minority are growing exponentially, so too is the gap separating the majority from the prosperity enjoyed by those happy few. This imbalance is the result of ideologies that defend the absolute autonomy of the marketplace and financial speculation. Consequently, they reject the right of states, charged with vigilance for the common good, to exercise any form of control. A new tyranny is being born, invisible and often virtual, which unilaterally and relentlessly imposes its own laws and rules." [94] There is no shortage of theories attempting to justify the present state of affairs or to explain that economic thinking requires us to wait for invisible market forces to resolve everything. Nevertheless, the dignity of every human person must be respected today, not tomorrow, and the extreme poverty of all those to whom this dignity is denied should constantly weigh upon our consciences.

93. In his Encyclical *Dilexit Nos*, Pope Francis reminded us that social sin consolidates a "structure of sin" within society, and is frequently "part of a dominant mindset that considers normal or reasonable what is merely selfishness and indifference. This then gives rise to social alienation." [95] It then becomes normal to ignore the poor and live as if they do not exist. It then likewise seems reasonable to organize the



economy in such a way that sacrifices are demanded of the masses in order to serve the needs of the powerful. Meanwhile, the poor are promised only a few "drops" that trickle down, until the next global crisis brings things back to where they were. A genuine form of alienation is present when we limit ourselves to theoretical excuses instead of seeking to resolve the concrete problems of those who suffer. Saint John Paul II had already observed that, "a society is alienated if its forms of social organization, production and consumption make it more difficult to offer the gift of self and to establish solidarity between people." [96]

94. We need to be increasingly committed to resolving the structural causes of poverty. This is a pressing need that "cannot be delayed, not only for the pragmatic reason of its urgency for the good order of society, but because society needs to be cured of a sickness which is weakening and frustrating it, and which can only lead to new crises. Welfare projects, which meet certain urgent needs, should be considered merely provisional responses." [97] I can only state once more that inequality "is the root of social ills." [98] Indeed, "it frequently becomes clear that, in practice, human rights are not equal for all." [99]

95. As it is, "the current model, with its emphasis on success and self-reliance, does not appear to favor an investment in efforts to help the slow, the weak or the less talented to find opportunities in life." [100] The same questions keep coming back to us. Does this mean that the less gifted are not human beings? Or that the weak do not have the same dignity as ourselves? Are those born with fewer opportunities of lesser value as human beings? Should they limit themselves merely to surviving? The worth of our societies, and our own future, depends on the answers we give to these questions. Either we regain our moral and spiritual dignity or we fall into a cesspool. Unless we stop and take this matter seriously, we will continue, openly or surreptitiously, "to legitimize the present model of distribution, where a minority believes that it has the right to consume in a way which can never be universalized, since the planet could not even contain the waste products of such consumption." [101]

96. One structural issue that cannot realistically be resolved from above and needs to be addressed as quickly as possible has to do with the locations, neighborhoods, homes and cities where the poor live and spend their time. All of us appreciate the beauty of "those cities which overcome paralyzing mistrust, integrate those who are different and make this very integration a new factor of development! How attractive are those cities which, even in their architectural design, are full of spaces which connect, relate and favor the recognition of others!" [102] Yet, at the same time, "we cannot fail to consider the effects on people's lives of environmental deterioration, current models of development and the throwaway culture." [103] For "the deterioration of the environment and of society affects the most vulnerable people on the planet." [104]

97. All the members of the People of God have a duty to make their voices heard, albeit in different ways, in order to point out and denounce such structural issues, even at the cost of appearing foolish or naïve. Unjust structures need to be recognized and eradicated by the force of good, by changing mindsets but also, with the help of science and technology, by developing effective policies for societal change. It must never be forgotten that the Gospel message has to do not only with an individual's personal relationship with the Lord, but also with something greater: "the Kingdom of God (cf. Lk 4:43); it is about loving God who reigns in our world. To the extent that he reigns within us, the life of society will be a setting for universal fraternity, justice, peace and dignity. Both Christian preaching and life, then, are meant to have an impact on society. We are seeking God's Kingdom." [105]

98. Finally, in a document that was not initially well received by everyone, we find a reflection that remains timely today: "The defenders of orthodoxy are sometimes accused of passivity, indulgence, or



culpable complicity regarding the intolerable situations of injustice and the political regimes which prolong them. Spiritual conversion, the intensity of the love of God and neighbor, zeal for justice and peace, the Gospel meaning of the poor and of poverty, are required of everyone, and especially of pastors and those in positions of responsibility. The concern for the purity of the faith demands giving the answer of effective witness in the service of one's neighbor, the poor and the oppressed in particular, in an integral theological fashion.” [\[106\]](#)

*The poor as subjects*

99. The life of the universal Church was enriched by the discernment of the Aparecida Conference, in which the Latin American bishops made clear that the Church's preferential option for the poor “is implicit in the Christological faith in the God who became poor for us, so as to enrich us with his poverty.” [\[107\]](#) The Aparecida Document situates the Church's mission in the present context of a globalized world marked by new and dramatic imbalances. [\[108\]](#) In their Final Message, the bishops wrote: “The stark differences between rich and poor invite us to work with greater commitment to being disciples capable of sharing the table of life, the table of all the sons and daughters of the Father, a table that is open and inclusive, from which no one is excluded. We therefore reaffirm our preferential and evangelical option for the poor.” [\[109\]](#)

100. At the same time, the Document, taking up a theme treated in earlier Conferences of the Latin American episcopate, insists on the need to consider marginalized communities as *subjects* capable of creating their own culture, rather than as *objects* of charity on the part of others. This means that such communities have the right to embrace the Gospel and to celebrate and communicate their faith in accord with the values present within their own cultures. Their experience of poverty gives them the ability to recognize aspects of reality that others cannot see; for this reason, society needs to listen to them. The same holds true for the Church, which should regard positively their “popular” practice of the faith. A fine passage from the Aparecida Document can help us reflect on this point and our proper response: “Only the closeness that makes us friends enables us to appreciate deeply the values of the poor today, their legitimate desires, and their own manner of living the faith... Day by day, the poor become agents of evangelization and of comprehensive human promotion: they educate their children in the faith, engage in ongoing solidarity among relatives and neighbors, constantly seek God, and give life to the Church's pilgrimage. In the light of the Gospel, we recognize their immense dignity and their sacred worth in the eyes of Christ, who was poor like them and excluded among them. Based on this experience of faith, we will share with them the defense of their rights.” [\[110\]](#)

101. All this entails one aspect of the option for the poor that we must constantly keep in mind, namely that it demands of us an attitude of attentiveness to others. “This loving attentiveness is the beginning of a true concern for their person which inspires me effectively to seek their good. This entails appreciating the poor in their goodness, in their experience of life, in their culture, and in their ways of living the faith. True love is always contemplative, and permits us to serve the other not out of necessity or vanity, but rather because he or she is beautiful above and beyond mere appearances... Only on the basis of this real and sincere closeness can we properly accompany the poor on their path of liberation.” [\[111\]](#) For this reason, I express my heartfelt gratitude to all those who have chosen to live among the poor, not merely to pay them an occasional visit but to live with them as they do. Such a decision should be deemed one of the highest forms of evangelical life.

102. In light of this, it is evident that all of us must “let ourselves be evangelized” [\[112\]](#) by the poor and acknowledge “the mysterious wisdom which God wishes to share with us through them.” [\[113\]](#) Growing up in precarious circumstances, learning to survive in the most adverse conditions, trusting in God with



the assurance that no one else takes them seriously, and helping one another in the darkest moments, the poor have learned many things that they keep hidden in their hearts. Those of us who have not had similar experiences of living this way certainly have much to gain from the source of wisdom that is the experience of the poor. Only by relating our complaints to their sufferings and privations can we experience a reproof that can challenge us to simplify our lives.

[76] John XXIII, *Radio Message to all the Christian faithful one month before the opening of the Second Vatican Ecumenical Council* (11 September 1962): AAS 54 (1962), 682.

[77] G. LERCARO, *Intervention in the XXXV General Congregation of the Second Vatican Ecumenical Council* (6 December 1962), 2: AS I/IV, 327-328.

[78] Ibid., 4: AS I/IV, 329.

[79] Institute for Religious Sciences (ed.), *Per la forza dello Spirito. Discorsi conciliari del Card. Giacomo Lercaro*, Bologna 1984, 115.

[80] Paul VI, *Address for the Solemn Inauguration of the Second Session of the Second Vatican Ecumenical Council* (29 September 1963): AAS 55 (1963) 857.

[81] Paul VI, *Catechesis* (11 November 1964): *Insegnamenti di Paolo VI*, II (1964), 984.

[82] Second Vatican Ecumenical Council, Pastoral Constitution *Gaudium et Spes*, 69, 71.

[83] Paul VI, Encyclical Letter *Populorum Progressio* (26 March 1967), 23: AAS 59 (1967), 269.

[84] Cf. ibid., 4: AAS 59 (1967), 259.

[85] John Paul II, Encyclical Letter *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis* (30 December 1987), 42: AAS 80 (1988), 572.

[86] Ibid., AAS 80 (1988), 573.

[87] John Paul II, Encyclical Letter *Laborem Exercens* (14 September 1981), 3: AAS 73 (1981), 584.

[88] Benedict XVI, Encyclical Letter *Caritas in Veritate* (29 June 2009), 7: AAS 101 (2009), 645.

[89] Ibid., 27: AAS 101 (2009), 661.

[90] Second General Conference of the Latin American Bishops, *Medellín Document* (24 October 1968), 14, n. 7: Celam, *Medellín. Conclusiones*, Lima 2005, 131-132.

[91] Francis, Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium* (24 November 2013), 202: AAS 105 (2013), 1105.

[92] Ibid., 205: AAS 105 (2013), 1106.

[93] Ibid., 190: AAS 105 (2013), 1099.

[94] Ibid., 56: AAS 105 (2013), 1043.

[95] Francis, Encyclical Letter *Dilexit Nos* (24 October 2024), 183: AAS 116 (2024), 1427.



[96] John Paul II, Encyclical Letter *Centesimus Annus* (1 May 1991), 41: AAS 83 (1991), 844-845.

[97] Francis, Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium* (24 November 2013), 202: AAS 105 (2013), 1105.

[98] *Ibid.*

[99] Francis, Encyclical Letter *Fratelli Tutti* (3 October 2020), 22: AAS 112 (2020), 976.

[100] Francis, Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium* (24 November 2013), 209: AAS 105 (2013), 1107.

[101] Francis, Encyclical Letter *Laudato Si'* (24 May 2015), 50: AAS 107 (2015), 866.

[102] Francis, Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium* (24 November 2013), 210: AAS 105 (2013), 1107.

[103] Francis, Encyclical Letter *Laudato Si'* (24 May 2015), 43: AAS 107 (2015), 863.

[104] *Ibid.*, 48: AAS 107 (2015), 865.

[105] Francis, Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium* (24 November 2013), 180: AAS 105 (2013), 1095.

[106] Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, *Instruction on Certain Aspects of the "Theology of Liberation"* (6 August 1984) XI, 18: AAS 76 (1984), 907-908.

[107] Fifth General Conference of the Latin American and Caribbean Bishops, *Aparecida Document*, (29 June 2007), n. 392, Bogotá 2007, pp. 179-180. Cf. Benedict XVI, *Address at the Inaugural Session of the Fifth General Conference of the Bishops of Latin America and the Caribbean* (13 May 2007), 3: AAS 99 (2007), 450.

[108] Cf. Fifth General Conference of the Latin American and Caribbean Bishops, *Aparecida Document* (29 June 2007), nn. 43-87, pp. 31-47.

[109] Fifth General Conference of the Latin American and Caribbean Bishops, *Final Message* (29 May 2007), n. 4, Bogotá 2007, p. 275.

[110] Fifth General Conference of the Latin American and Caribbean Bishops, *Aparecida Document* (29 June 2007), n. 398, p. 182.

[111] Francis, Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium* (24 November 2013), 199: AAS 105 (2013), 1103-1104.

[112] *Ibid.*, 198: AAS 105 (2013), 1103.

[113] *Ibid.*