It Takes a Whole Village
To . . . Do Just About
Everything!

Embracing a Preferential Option for the Poor

Eva Marie Lumas

A preferential option for the poor calls us to participate in God’s ongoing activity in human history by entering into right relationships with all other persons and all of creation—relationships that honor the inherent dignity and unquestionable worth of everyone and everything God has made.

The students of Dr. Frank Cherry’s statistics class at Howard University School of Divinity in Washington, D.C., were relieved, but somewhat puzzled to see a sign on their classroom door one day that read, “Today’s class is cancelled. Please pray for the victims of the Missouri floods.” While relieved to have another week to complete their class assignment, the students’ puzzlement about Dr. Cherry’s connection to the flood victims was evident as they greeted him the next week. Entering the classroom, just about every student expressed sympathy for the Missouri flood victims whose stories had headlined the evening news for several days. And, to satisfy their curiosity, some students asked if he had friends,

Eva Marie Lumas, S.S.S., is assistant professor of religious education and culture at the Franciscan School of Theology in Berkeley, California, and a member of the faculty at the Institute for Black Catholic Studies at Xavier University, New Orleans. Her Doctor of Ministry degree is from Howard University in Washington, D.C. A much sought-after lecturer across the United States, she has initiated a number of guidebooks and programs for the African American community.
relatives, or a family home affected by the flood. Dr. Cherry responded to each question with a simple smile and shake of his head indicating that none of the students’ assumptions about his connection to the flood victims were correct.

When everyone was assembled, Dr. Cherry began the class by thanking everyone for their concern and explaining his absence the previous week. Dr. Cherry told the class that he was a member of his congregation’s Disaster Relief Committee. His church raised money annually to send volunteers, emergency funds, and/or needed supplies to at least one site of a natural disaster every year. He and several other members of his congregation were registered and certified volunteers with the American Red Cross and could be called on at any time to staff a local emergency aid phone banks, donate money or provide on-site volunteer services to disaster victims. He said the flood occurred just as the Disaster Relief Committee had completed its commitment to another ongoing relief effort, so the committee members decided to turn to the Missouri relief effort.

In this instance, Dr. Cherry’s church had sent money to a local Missouri relief organization. He and several other members of his committee had gone to Missouri to volunteer with Red Cross relief efforts. And, several other members of the committee were still helping to staff local Red Cross phone banks to facilitate ongoing relief efforts. He said his committee would continue to send aid annually to Missouri as long as their assistance was needed, and this decision would be determined in collaboration with leaders of the affected community in light of other disaster relief efforts that might develop in the future. Dr. Cherry finished his remarks by thanking everyone on behalf of the flood victims for their prayer, inviting the students to join one of his congregation’s aid and advocacy committees or to start one at their own local church.

The class response to Dr. Cherry’s remarks was a hushed chorus of “Wow!” It was the kind of sound that expresses a new or unexpected insight. Standing before them was a 60-something-year-old, African American, professor of mathematics from an urban, mostly African American, Presbyterian church who had just travelled half way across the nation to help a predominately Caucasian, interdenominational, rural community he didn’t know. If that was not enough, his compassion and weekly tithe, as well as that of other members of his church, would continue until the Missouri flood victims had begun to recover the way of life that they lost.

Fifteen years later, I would not have been surprised to meet Dr. Cherry and other members of his Disaster Relief Committee in the Gulf Coast after Hurricane Katrina. By then I had a fuller understanding of the magnitude of destruction caused by a natural disaster—especially the loss of life. Beyond that is the perilous situation of the survivors. Family homes and small businesses are foreclosed on working people who cannot afford the necessary insurance to reestablish themselves. Many persons are displaced and unemployed because their place of work or their children’s school has been closed. Other persons often find that they are unable to return to their home or workplace even if they were not damaged because
the communities where they lived no longer have the necessary civic services or commercial venues to sustain their lives. I had learned the exploitive potential of disaster of economics that forces people to abandon or sell their property for pennies on the dollar because they do not have the money or legal recourse to rebuild their lives. But, most of all, I had learned how poverty and disasters (whether natural or human made) frequently reinforce each other because poor people often have little influence over the local and national government agencies whose short-sighted city planning, inadequate building codes, disinterests in environmental protections, and lack of emergency or recovery assistance often contribute to the cause and the impact of such disasters.

To be truly missionary, a parish must embrace a preferential option for the poor. We are called to become disciple-citizens who are a loving, merciful, and just presence in the world.

**Who Are the Poor?**

Today, most of us know well that vulnerable people are often taken advantage of, and they do not have to experience a natural disaster to fall victim to it. Most of us probably know someone who works hard but is still just a few paychecks away from homelessness. We know that U.S. citizens working full-time for the minimum wage earn at least 50 percent less than they need to pay for decent housing, healthy food, basic utilities, or health and child care. We know that millions of people have lost their savings and/or retirement funds due to poor business practices that went unchecked by government regulations. We know that thousands of people have lost their homes due to the predatory lending practices of banks. U.S.-owned and multinational corporations are outsourcing manufacturing jobs to places with little if any labor rights legislation, living wage standards, or environmental protections—practices that place these laborers at risk on their job; reinforce their economic dependency on the profit-seeking ambitions of others; and often result in the unregulated contamination their air, waterways, and land.

Today, we know that the economically poor are not just a collection of lazy or irresponsible persons who refuse to work in order to provide for themselves. They are most often members of a growing unemployed labor force who have fallen victim to a shrinking number of good paying jobs. They are people whose jobs were terminated due to corporate “downsizing,” which often means that the company overestimated the actual cost of the goods they produced. The poor are Latin American farmers whose prime land is controlled by multinational corporations who pay meager wages to the local population for the high-priced coffees these companies sell worldwide. They are the masses of people paid minimum-wage jobs in the oil fields of Africa and the Middle East who never reap any significant benefits of their labor. They are the specialized craftsmen and women of India.
and China who make tapestries, cloth, and carvings in sweat shops while their art is marketed to persons whose lifestyle the workers themselves will never share. The poor are the uneducated and undereducated masses of people here in the United States and throughout the world who have never been provided with the necessary encouragement, knowledge, skills, social relationships, or motivation that would empower them to rise to their full stature as a co-creator of the world in which they live. And, yes, they are the victims of hurricanes, earthquakes, drought, tsunamis, tornadoes, wildfires, and floods.

The poor are the vulnerable and they are made vulnerable by racial, cultural, social, and institutional attitudes and practices that privilege one group at the expense of another. This understanding of the poor is not new. It is at least as old as biblical times. Then, there were two groups of persons commonly referred to as the poor. The first group included widows and orphans. At that time, women were believed to be “the property” of their husbands and had no financial resources of their own. In the event of their husband’s death, they had no money and “belonged to no one” unless a relative took them in (USCCB 7). Children without parents also “belonged to no one,” which meant their survival was dependent on the generosity of relatives. Even if these women and children were taken into a family member’s home, they were once again considered “the property” of the male head of household where they lived. Similarly, the elderly or chronically ill who lost their primary caregivers were left to beg in order to provide for their needs.

The second group of people referred to as the poor were the foreigners including immigrants and refugees. These persons had no social, cultural or religious ties to the community where they lived. Therefore, they had no legal claim to the community’s protections or resources (CCHD 8; USCCB 12). By extension, the social underclass of forced laborers during biblical times were also considered to be foreigners. As colonized captives of war, these persons were often forced into a life of servitude or they were used for the amusement of the ruling class. Since their sole value to the ruling class was service or amusement, they were treated like “the other animal” that had no say over the quality or even the length of their lives.

These scriptural depictions of the poor clearly show how sexism, classism, and racism divides persons and groups into categories that give some people superior social status, rights, and privileges while other people are believed to be inferior. These persons are forced into dependent relationships with the few people who enjoy a superior status because of their race, culture, gender or social class. Because

To be truly missionary, a parish must embrace a preferential option for the poor.
of their forced dependency, this group of people—the majority of all people—is thus made vulnerable: their survival requires them to be preoccupied with managing the daily demands of their lives. The consequence is that they have little time, energy, support, or opportunity to develop the relationships, talents, resources or strategies that would allow them to actively participate in creating the “beloved community” that they and everyone else so rightly deserve.

These scriptural understandings of “the poor” reveal the complexity of poverty. People not only become vulnerable because they are poor, they also become poor because they are vulnerable—vulnerable to a social hierarchy that maintains the superiority and elite social status of a few persons and groups. The poor are not just those persons who are economically deprived or dependent even though their circumstance has a particular urgency. The poor are all of the vulnerable. They are all the people who are socially neglected or regarded as socially inferior because of their race, ethnicity, culture, language, gender, sexual orientation, age, physical disability, spirituality, or religious tradition. They are all of the people whose very person as well as their values, talent, knowledge, wisdom, and preferences are not believed to be worthy of respect or development. They are persons who have been pushed to the margins of human society because they are both under-appreciated and under-represented by the exclusionary social values and practices of the upper and supposedly superior ruling class.

While all of these poor people may not go to bed hungry, they often suffer the psychological impoverishment of low self-esteem or a negative self-image that forces them to live their lives self-consciously—always fearing they are not good enough or smart enough to pursue their noble ambitions. Some of these people may be employed and well paid, but they suffer existential poverty because of the larger society’s indifference or contempt. Still others suffer spiritual impoverishment. They have lost hope and a sense of the ultimate good or purpose in life (Elizondo 159). For many of the persons there is also a political impoverishment because they have no decisive influence on the social or institutional policies and practices of the communities in which they live. Indeed, all the people thought to be social misfits or a social burden are also poor.

*From Each One According to Their Gifts,*  
*To Each One According to Their Need*

But, imagine the kind of world we would live in if everyone presumed everyone else’s dignity, worth, and participation? What if everyone was willing to give up something they want so that all people could have something they need? What if we believed our most important accomplishments are achieved by our ability to collaborate rather than compete with others? What if we were to regard the differences between people’s gender, age, race, ethnicity, culture, religion, language,
sexual orientation, or socioeconomic background as opportunities to learn something more about God, community, or our own humanity rather than obstacles to be overcome? And, what if we thought of sharing someone else’s hardship as a privileged relationship rather than a tiresome social arrangement?

That is what it means to have a preferential option for the poor! It requires us to be disciple-citizens “joined to God’s own mission in the world” (see Hunsberger in this issue). It calls us to consciously and willfully participate in God’s ongoing activity in human history by calling us into right relationships with all other persons and all of creation—relationships that honor the inherent dignity and unquestionable worth of everyone and everything God has made. It calls us to live, pray, deliberate, and work together to “dismantle the barriers while building the bridges” that would enable all of us to embrace all other persons and all of creation with the same respect we want for ourselves. It requires us to strive toward unwavering compassion, empathy, mercy, openness, encouragement, generosity, and the commitment to want or take nothing for ourselves that would prevent “the other” from having what they need to rise to their full stature (see Bowe in this issue).

The Acts of the Apostles offers us a radical example of such disciple-citizenship. It describes an occasion when one group of Christians gave up all their private property and shared whatever they had with their whole community such that all had what they needed (Acts 4:32-37). This biblical account reveals the root of phrase: “from each one according to their ability, to each one according to their need.” It presents us with a dramatic image of what the world would be like if we were each to treat all other persons as we want to be treated. Even though this biblical story may seem unrealistic, if not unattractive, it clearly demonstrates that a full embrace of Christian discipleship calls us “to live justly, love tenderly and walk humbly with God” (Micah 6:8).

At the same time, we know all too well that this remarkable display of social equality did not last long. Today, we know that most Christian communities of biblical times struggled most of the time to overcome socioeconomic inequality, ethnic and cultural prejudice, and religious intolerance. These social ills were so engrained in their society that we are hard pressed to name even one Christian society whose social values and practices mirrors the one described above in the Acts of the Apostles. But we should not lose sight of the fact that the call to justice was also deeply embedded in the in the history of the Jews that became the early
Christian community. As Elsa Tamez reminds us, Jesus the Christ raised within
the Jewish tradition “initiated his ministry in Nazareth by reading himself the
words of the prophet Isaiah that affirmed a new jubilee: “The Spirit of the Lord
is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has
sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to
let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor’” (Luke 4:18-19)
(Tamez, 45–46).

With this act Jesus lets us know that God continues to hear and respond to the
year of the Lord’s favor” reminded his community of the commitment to justice
reflected in two of their socioreligious traditions: the sabbatical year (the seventh
year) and the jubilee year (every fifty years—about every two generations, the
Grand Sabbatical) (Pennock 2007, 151). During the sabbatical year, land was not
to be planted, debts were to be forgiven and slaves were to be set free. During the
jubilee year, debts were forgiven, slaves were set free, and land returned to its
original owner. The jubilee year was essentially a time to start over. This practice
allowed for more equitable access to the rights and benefits of their community.
These practices grew out of the Israelite belief that God’s love is constant and
unconditional. They also believed that God’s love is offered to humanity through
acts of mercy and justice. They believed that the people of God were chosen to
do what God does—to be faithfully and unconditionally loving, merciful, and just.
Observing the sabbatical and jubilee years served to remind the Israelites that
they were once a poor and oppressed people rescued by a loving God. They believed
that the most appropriate expression of their gratitude was to care for the poor
and oppressed in their midst (Pennock 2007, 151). Sabbatical and jubilee justice
demonstrated the primary belief that anchored their faith tradition: “a saved people
were a saving people” (see Bevans in this issue). However, these justice practices
had been long neglected due to the vulnerable social status that the Jews experi-
enced during six hundred years of colonization, as well as the varied ways that
some of the Jews had become resigned to the corruptive forces of oppression.
Jesus began his ministry by proclaiming that too many people were suffering too
much to be ignored by the people of God. It was time for jubilee justice, time to
begin anew (Copeland 220–225).

**Power at Its Best is Love Doing the Work of Justice**

The Christian tradition is anchored in the words and actions of Jesus the Christ,
God with us. At the heart of all Jesus said and did was his belief that he had
come to do the will of the One who sent him (John 3:34, 6:38). It follows that the
words and actions of Christian disciple-citizens must be anchored in the belief
that we are called to do as Jesus did. We must assume the responsibilities of being
a loving, merciful and just presence in the world. This is the foundational meaning of a preferential option for the poor: It means that our words and actions reflect our respect for the dignity, worth, and well-being of every person and everything God has made. It means that our primary concern is to be loving, merciful, and just. It does not mean that we should love the poor and marginalized more than we love the privileged and powerful. Rather, it does mean that we seek to establish interdependent and equitable relationships between them. In this way we remain mindful of the fact that we are all children of the one God. We are all made in God’s image. We are all gifted by God. We are all dependent on that same God.

We are called to acknowledge that the misfortune or good fortune that life presents to us are not signs of God’s partiality for some people over others. The less fortunate must live their lives clinging to the Christian hope that “by the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace toward me has not been in vain” (1 Cor 15:10). Their good fortune must lead people to live their lives clinging to the Christian mandate, “All things are lawful, but all things do not build up. Do not seek your own advantage, but that of the other” (1 Cor 10:23-24). In this way, they all remember that God has provided a world of abundance, not scarcity, so they need not compete, exploit, or exclude. More than that, we learn that our true identity and purpose in life are not to be measured by comparing ourselves to others. Both the less fortunate and the well-to-do groups are blessed and broken. Both groups have responsibilities toward the well-being of the other. Both groups are called to pray, live, deliberate, and work together to provide for everyone’s need—to announce and help create the year of the Lord.

We are called to remember that each of us is in some way vulnerable to the self-serving or self-depreciating limitations of our humanity. Yet, because we are divinely created persons we must remember that we are also endowed with the power to help create the beloved community. Jesus claims and calls us to reclaim the full inheritance of our humanity by striving to act toward each other with the love, mercy, and justice shown by the way God acts toward us. The jubilee justice shown by the Christian community recorded in the Acts of the Apostles (4:32-37) shows us that it is possible.

**Aid and Advocacy**

By calling us to develop a preferential option for the poor, our church is calling us all to acknowledge our need, potential, and responsibility for jubilee justice. It lets us know once again that too many people are suffering too much to be ignored by people of faith. It also shows us that disciple-citizenship requires more than isolated acts of charity or praying for the poor. Although charity and prayer are needed, they are not enough. Jubilee justice requires both charity (aid) and justice (advocacy) (see Pennock 2009, 39). By embracing the vision of jubilee...
justice, the missionary parish can live, pray, and work toward right relationships among all of God’s people and all of creation.

**References**


