

Economic Justice and the Preferential Option for the Poor

Introduction

The preferential option for the poor, which calls for putting the needs of people who are poor and vulnerable ahead of the needs of others, is a principle that can be traced back to the Hebrew Bible and the foundations of Christianity; however, it was not explicitly named in Catholic social teaching (CST) until recently. While the language of the preferential option for the poor does not appear in early social encyclicals, the principle is present implicitly whenever the teaching pays particular attention to the needs of the most vulnerable members of society. This attention reflects the central meaning of the preferential option for the poor—the people with the most need of charity and justice require the greatest response. Often described as the option for the poor and vulnerable, the application of this principle goes beyond the context of economic poverty to recognize other factors that can lead to marginalization, preventing people from full participation in society. Consider your understanding of poverty and the factors that lead people to impoverishment.

- What are some of the causes of poverty? What are some the ways impoverishment affects people?
- Identify some pathways a person might take to get out poverty. What obstacles might make following these pathways difficult? Who is responsible for alleviating poverty?
- Have you been involved in a service-learning setting that challenged or affirmed any of your ideas or assumptions about poverty?

This chapter will focus specifically on the issue of material poverty and examine the Catholic Church's teachings on economic justice. Consider your understanding of the economy and what economic justice means to you, using the following questions:

- What is the purpose of the economy? What signs indicate that a nation's economy is achieving its purpose?
- Who benefits the most and the least from the US economy as it is currently structured?
- What is economic justice? What values, principles, and priorities shape your understanding?

This chapter will trace the development of the principle of the preferential option for the poor in Catholic social tradition first by examining the influence of the bishops' conference of Latin America in conversation with the work of theologians and biblical scholars in articulating the preferential option for the poor. The theological reflection and action for justice that emerged in the context of Central and South America during the decades following Vatican II helped facilitate a shift in CST toward an explicit articulation of the preferential option for the poor.

This chapter will continue by discussing the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops' (USCCB) application of the principle of the preferential option for the poor in addressing poverty in the United States, giving particular attention to their 1986 pastoral letter, *Economic Justice for All*. The principles laid out in *Economic Justice for All*, particularly the preferential option for the poor, are made visible in the USCCB official initiative to address poverty in the United States, the Catholic Campaign for Human Development. Next the chapter will draw on social science data and the work of a contemporary theologian to help service learners better analyze and address poverty in the United States. The final section of the chapter provides a summary followed by a vignette drawn from an actual service-learning setting and a series of questions designed to help readers become more familiar with the service-learning process.

Preferential Option for the Poor in Catholic Social Teaching

The Call to Protect the Poor

Before the preferential option for the poor was specifically articulated as a major principle of CST, the early social encyclicals recognized the need to protect and care for the most vulnerable members of society. For example, in writings on the state's role in protecting workers, Popes Pius XI and Leo XIII expressed particular concern for the welfare of women and children, who they regarded as weaker members of society.¹ Also, for example, Pius XI expressed this concern in his 1931 encyclical *Quadragesimo anno* (*The Reconstruction of Social Order*): "The function of the rulers of the State, moreover, is to watch over the community and its parts; but in protecting private individuals in their rights, chief consideration ought to be given to the weak and the poor" (no. 25).

Early CST did not aim for radical social transformation. In *Rerum novarum* (*On the Condition of Labor*, 1891), Leo XIII, who believed that natural inequalities exist in society (no. 34), opposed the socialist agenda of leveling class distinctions. This view had implications for the Catholic Church's teaching on social justice. The early social encyclicals emphasized cooperation between social classes rather than the transformation of class structures in achieving justice for the poor. In *Rerum novarum*, Leo XIII argued that the Church could foster mutual love and goodwill among social classes necessary for eliminating the strife between the wealthy and the working class. He argues, "First of all, there is no intermediary more powerful than religion (whereof the Church is the interpreter and guardian) in drawing the rich and the working class together, by reminding each of its duties to the other, and especially of the obligations of justice" (no. 19).

1. Some today criticize early Catholic social teaching for being paternalistic, particularly with respect to women. It is important to locate the early social encyclicals in their historical contexts. Pope Leo XIII, like many people in that time period, believed that women were naturally suited for work in the home, and he wanted to protect this role. Feminist thinkers have pointed out the limitations of this view of women.

Later CST recognized that cooperation in unjust situations is difficult and emphasized the role of social transformation in promoting justice. Pope Paul VI, reflecting a global perspective and an awareness of the effects of colonization on the developing world, pointed out in *Populorum progressio* (*The Development of Peoples*, 1967), how structural inequalities perpetuate social conflict. With particular attention to the context of Latin America, the pope identified the connection between the suffering caused by extreme economic injustices and revolutionary uprisings.²

The injustice of certain situations cries out for God's attention. Lacking the bare necessities of life, whole nations are under the thumb of others; they cannot act on their own initiative; they cannot exercise personal responsibility; they cannot work toward a higher degree of cultural refinement or a greater participation in social and public life. They are sorely tempted to redress these insults to their human nature by violent means. (No. 30)

Although the pope recognizes in *Populorum progressio* (PP) the temptation to resort to violent uprisings, he cautions against it, recognizing that such actions "engender new injustices, introduce new inequities and bring new disasters" (no. 31). Nevertheless, the pope argues for "profound changes" (no. 32) to correct the disparity of wealth perpetuating social conflict in developing countries.

In 1971 Paul VI called a synod (an international gathering of bishops) to address justice in the world. This synod, made up largely of bishops from Latin America, articulated in *Justice in the World (JW)* an explicit relationship between the Church's social mission and the transformation of unjust structures. The bishops affirmed that

2. El Salvador provides an example of the context to which Pope Paul VI was likely addressing. During the 1970s and 1980s a military-led government backed by the interests of a few wealthy landowners with US military aid violently resisted movements for reform of the country's oppressive economic inequalities. The conflict between the military government and the revolutionary guerrilla groups fueled a long civil war (1979-1992) in which thousands of people were killed or disappeared. For more information on the context, see Anna Lisa Peterson, *Martyrdom and the Politics of Religion: Progressive Catholicism in El Salvador's Civil War* (New York: State University of New York Press, 1997).

"Action on behalf of justice and participation in the transformation of the world fully appear to us as a constitutive dimension of the preaching of the Gospel" (no. 6). By emphasizing the social implications of the gospel message, the bishops direct the Church toward advocacy for the poor and oppressed. They ground their understanding of justice in a biblical view of God as a liberator of the oppressed: "In the Old Testament God reveals himself to us as the liberator of the oppressed and the defender of the poor, demanding from people faith in him and justice towards one's neighbor" (no. 30).

This section traced an important shift in CST that lays a foundation for the Catholic Church's contemporary understanding of the preferential option for the poor. The early social encyclicals of Leo XIII and Pius XI positioned the Church as a mediator between the rich and the poor, emphasizing the need for harmony and mutual respect between social classes. Following the writings of Paul VI, the 1971 synod of bishops observed that poverty oppressed people by limiting their ability to develop and flourish. Following this observation, the Catholic Church has positioned itself as an advocate for the poor and vulnerable.

The Contribution of Liberation Theology

A theological shift in the middle of the twentieth century shaped the Catholic Church's contemporary understanding of the preferential option for the poor. The shift involved the growing realization that theology is contextual, reflecting the historical and cultural realities out of which it emerges. The Second Vatican Council (1962-1965), which drew attention to both the importance of history and the Catholic Church's global nature, opened the doors for the emergence of new theologies that consider people's situation in life. This shift provided the context for the development of liberation theology, which aims to see reality from the perspective of the poor and the vulnerable and lifts up the preferential option for the poor as a key insight into what it means to be Christian.

When liberation theologians refer to poverty, they are not writing about a state of holiness that many have tried to achieve by embracing a life of simplicity. Rather, liberation theologians refer to

poverty as an immediate reality that causes great suffering and may even impel faithful Christians to wonder if God is punishing them. When liberation theology emerged out of Latin America during the 1970s and 1980s, poverty was a leading cause of death in many communities. Out of this context, liberation theologians name poverty as a reality that diminishes human dignity and opposes life. One of the early voices in liberation theology was Peruvian priest Gustavo Gutierrez. He speaks to this perspective:

Life, a gift from God, is also the first human right. The poverty and insignificance in which many people live violates that right. In effect, poverty means death, both physical death that is early and unjust, due to lack of the most basic necessities for life, and cultural death, as expressed in oppression and discrimination for reasons of race, culture or gender.³

Liberation theologians view poverty as a negation of life and therefore speak of it as a sin, specifically as a social sin because it is perpetuated by social structures and institutions (i.e., economic markets, trade agreements, tax policies, etc.). Redemption from social sin requires a transformation of the unjust structures that perpetuate the harm. This realization provides the basis for framing the Christian theme of salvation as liberation. Liberation theologians invite Christians to consider how God's redemptive action occurs not only in a personal relationship with Christ or in God's final judgment at the end of time but also in the midst of human history through the building of the kingdom of God. This realization provides a focus for the mission of the Catholic Church.

A meeting of the bishops' conference of Latin America (Consejo Episcopal Latinoamericano or CELAM) in 1968 at Medellín, Colombia, was important in the history of the Catholic Church and for CST. At Medellín, the bishops identified justice for the poor as a biblical mandate and made working for justice on behalf of the poor a

3. Gustavo Gutierrez, "Memory and Prophecy" in *Option for the Poor in Christian Theology*, ed. Daniel Groody (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2007), 27.

El Salvador Martyrs

Liberation theology emerged not only through ideas but also through concrete actions for justice. Sometimes such actions threaten people who benefit from unjust structures. In the context of the Salvadoran civil war (1979–1992) and the conflict that preceded it, Church leaders became targets of military violence because of their advocacy for the poor. Many people consider these individuals to be martyrs (people who die as a result of their commitment to their faith). Archbishop Oscar Romero, who spoke against the repressive military government, was assassinated by a Salvadoran soldier in 1980. In 1989, six Jesuits along with their housekeeper and her daughter were assassinated in their home by a US-trained Salvadoran soldier. The murders of the six Salvadoran Jesuits in particular prompted many US citizens to examine their country's involvement in supporting and training the Salvadoran military. The Ignatian Solidarity Network developed in response to this issue and continues to commemorate the deaths of the Salvadoran martyrs as they advocate for social justice.⁴

priority. Echoing liberation theologians, the bishops associated poverty with structural injustices that perpetuate a cycle of marginalization and state-sponsored violence against people who called for reform. They use the language of liberation to describe God's action in history:

The Latin American Church has a message for all men on this continent who 'hunger and thirst after justice.' The very God who creates men in his image and likeness, creates the 'earth and all that is in it for the use of all men and all nations, in such a way that created goods can reach all in a more just manner,' and gives them power to transform and perfect the world in solidarity. It is the same God who, in

4. See <http://ignatiansolidarity.net/>.

the fullness of time, sends his Son in the flesh, so that He might come to liberate all men from the slavery to which sin has subjected them: hunger, misery, oppression and ignorance, in a word, that injustice and hatred which have their origin in human selfishness.⁵

The observation that social and economic structures oppress people living in poverty provides the rationale for the preferential option for the poor. Some people find the language of the preferential option for the poor to be confusing or misleading. To say that God prefers some people over others seems to imply that God's love is subject to the same limitations as human love, suggesting that God's love is partial and prejudiced. Liberation theologians do not use this language to undermine the belief that God's love is universal, maximal, and nondiscriminatory. Rather, they argue that God offers a preferential concern for the poor because social structures disadvantage them. Biblical scholar Elsa Tamez explains this as follows:

We say that the option of God for the poor is preferential in the sense that God loves all of God's creatures but has a preferential or special love for the poor precisely because of their disadvantaged position in an unequal and discriminating society. . . . The foundation of the option for the poor is the intention to end structural sin that produces dehumanization of the poor as well as those responsible for their poverty. In other words, we can affirm that precisely because the love of God is universal, God opts for the poor so that there may no longer be excluded persons in society.⁶

Liberation theology draws on the biblical understanding of the preferential option for the poor and places it at the center of the church's social mission.

5. CELAM, Documents from Medellín, in *Renewing the Earth: Catholic Documents on Peace, Justice and Liberation*, eds. David O'Brien and Thomas Shannon (New York: Doubleday, 1977), 3.

6. Elsa Tamez, "Poverty, the Poor and the Option for the Poor," in *Option for the Poor*, ed. Groody, 46.

The Reception of Liberation Theology

Liberation theology developed through the work of professional theologians such as Gustavo Gutierrez, the Latin American bishops, and laywomen and laymen who reflected on the meaning of the experiences of those who were poor in light of the gospel. The theology that emerged has not always been fully received by official leaders of the Catholic Church. In 1984, during the papacy of John Paul II, when Joseph Ratzinger (who became Pope Benedict XVI) was prefect for the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, the Vatican issued a statement, "Instruction on Certain Aspects of the 'Theology of Liberation'." The document criticized some theologies of liberation for incorporating Marxist themes "not compatible with the Christian conception of humanity and society" (section VII, no. 8).⁷ The instruction does, however, embrace the principle of the option for the poor, which became a more pronounced theme of CST after the development of liberation theology. This principle is now widely regarded as integral to the Christian message. Benedict XVI reflected this in a 2007 statement: "the 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 (cf. 2 Cor 8:9)."⁸

The United States Conference of Catholic Bishops on the Economy

The USCCB applied CST, including the principle of the preferential option for the poor, to economic life in their 1986 pastoral letter,

7. Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, "Instruction on Certain Aspects of the 'Theology of Liberation'" (Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1984).

8. Pope Benedict XVI, Address of His Holiness Benedict XVI to the Bishops of Latin America and the Caribbean, Shrine of Aparecida, May 13, 2007, no. 3, available online at http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/benedict_xvi/speeches/2007/may/documents/hf_ben-xvi_spe_20070513_conference-aparecida_en.html.

Economic Justice for All. This section will examine the major themes of the text and highlight how these themes inform the bishops' anti-poverty initiative, the Catholic Campaign for Human Development.

The Context of *Economic Justice for All*

When the bishops formed a committee to draft a pastoral letter on economic justice in 1980, they intended to focus on a critique of Marxism. Archbishop Rembert Weakland, the chair of the committee, pushed the members to focus on the moral dimensions of capitalism instead, noting that this would be more relevant and challenging to the US context.⁹ The committee's work coincided with the presidency of Ronald Reagan (1981–1989), whose approach to economics relied on tax cuts intended to increase consumer spending. Reagan, and others, advocated for little government interference in order to promote freedom in the market. Many Americans believe that this *laissez-faire* ("let it be") approach to capitalism results in a strong economy that ultimately benefits the whole society, while others critique unregulated free-market capitalism for prioritizing profit over the common good and leaving the impoverished behind without a safety net.

Since *Rerum novarum* (*On the Condition of Labor*), CST has offered a sustained critique of both liberal capitalism and socialism. The USCCB follows this tradition by neither endorsing nor fundamentally rejecting particular economic systems, nor do they attempt to create a new economy based on the principles of Catholic teaching. Rather, they draw on the themes of Catholic social thought, particularly human dignity, the call to community and participation, solidarity, and the preferential option for the poor to develop a framework for economic justice.

Though the USCCB did not endorse or reject particular economic systems in the document, they did offer critiques and concrete suggestions for how to improve the capitalist system of the United States. In doing so, the bishops recognized that they were taking

9. Charles Curran, "Reception of Economic Teaching in the United States," in *Modern Catholic Social Teaching: Commentaries and Interpretations*, ed. Kenneth Himes et al. (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2005), 478.

a stance on a controversial matter, and they anticipated that there would be debates among Catholics on the moral authority of their recommendations. The bishops identify their statements as *prudential judgments*, a term used in Catholic moral theology to distinguish reasonable suggestions on moral life from authoritative declarations about what is morally good or evil. In *Economic Justice for All* (EJA) they state,

We know that some of our specific recommendations are controversial. As bishops, we do not claim to make these prudential judgments with the same kind of authority that marks our declarations of principle. But we feel obliged to teach by example how Christians can undertake concrete analysis and make specific judgments on economic issues. The church's teachings cannot be left at the level of appealing generalities. (No. 20)

The bishops are careful to distinguish prudential judgments from authoritative moral principles for a couple of reasons. First, they recognize that Catholics of good conscience can disagree on how to apply the principles of CST in actual contexts. The bishops claim to avoid dictating how Catholics should vote, recognizing the legitimate separation of church and state. Second, they identify themselves as religious leaders, as experts on Catholic faith and morality, not as economists, sociologists, or political scientists. Speaking to this, the USCCB states the following:

In our letter, we write as pastors, not public officials. We speak as moral teachers, not economic technicians. We seek not to make some political or ideological point but to lift up the human and ethical dimensions of economic life, aspects too often neglected in public discussion. We bring to this task a dual heritage of Catholic social teaching and traditional American values. (EJA, no. 7)

Like the US bishops' 1983 pastoral letter on peace, *Economic Justice for All* was the result of a broad consultative effort that sought to integrate multiple perspectives. The bishops relied on the expertise of many others, including economists, workers, business owners, ministers,

activists, and theologians. They describe the process of drafting the letter as involving "careful inquiry, wide consultation, and prayerful discernment" (EJA, no. 3), noting that they were enriched by the listening process. The result of this effort was nearly one-hundred pages of analysis of the economic context of the United States, with theological, biblical, and ethical reflection on that context. The bishops also made constructive suggestions for developing a more just US economy, describing their proposal as "a New American Experiment." The bishops' new American experiment was framed as a full realization of democracy, one that allowed everyone to participate in the American dream (EJA, nos. 295–297).

Themes of *Economic Justice for All*

The theme of participation is central to the bishops' vision of economic justice, and it provides a focus for organizing the major principles of the letter, including the principle of the preferential option for the poor. The bishops state boldly, "We judge any economic system by what it does *for* and *to* people and by how it permits all to *participate* in it" (EJA, no. 13). There are many ways a society can evaluate its economy. It can evaluate an economy based on how it promotes profit, production, or distribution. By naming participation as the criterion for judging an economy, the bishops are offering a personalist perspective on economic life, summed up in the statement, "The economy should serve people, not the other way around" (EJA, no. 13). Implicit in their statement are the following assumptions, which they directly state: that the economy has moral dimensions because it is a human activity and that the human dimension cannot be considered alongside other dimensions of the economy. A personalist approach to the economy argues that the human dimension must be the center of all economic life.

The bishops' focus on participation has a firm grounding in the Catholic social tradition, particularly in light of the principle of the call to community. The bishops emphasize participation within the community because of the theological assumption that God created human beings for relationship, making persons inherently social. Following the assumption that people are social beings, to exclude an individual from the life of community can be considered a

violation of human potential. There are many ways an individual can be prevented from participating in the economic life of a community. The bishops describe patterns of economic exclusion:

Within the United States, individuals, families, and local communities fall victim to a downward cycle of poverty generated by economic forces they are powerless to influence. The poor, the disabled, and the unemployed too often are simply left behind. . . . These patterns of exclusion are created by free human beings. In this sense they can be called forms of social sin. (*EJA*, no. 77)

By describing marginalization from the community as a form of social sin, the bishops link the Church's social mission with the work to overcome economic injustices. Again, social sin refers to the structures of injustice that perpetuate racism, sexism, and poverty. Redemption from social sin requires a transformation of unjust structures. In this case, the bishops are inviting people to participate in overcoming the social sins engendered in the cycle of poverty.

The right to participate in community is grounded in the principle of the common good as developed in CST. The bishops' insistence that everyone has the right and responsibility to participate in the common good provides a basic argument for the preferential option for the poor. When individuals are empowered to participate in social life, they strengthen the whole community. Recall that the Catholic social tradition refers to the common good to point to all that is produced in social life that allows the whole community to flourish. Although people rightly pursue a good life as individuals, CST calls people to pursue the common good. According to CST, the common good is not measured by the greatest good for the majority but rather by the flourishing of everyone. The commitment to the common good, therefore, involves a preferential commitment to the flourishing of the poor and vulnerable of a community.

The bishops offer a biblical and theological mandate for the preferential option for the poor in *Economic Justice for All*:

Though in the Gospels and in the New Testament as a whole the offer of salvation is extended to all peoples, Jesus takes

the side of those most in need, physically and spiritually. The example of Jesus poses a number of challenges to the contemporary church. It imposes a prophetic mandate to speak for those who have no one to speak for them, to be a defender of the defenseless, who in biblical terms are the poor. It also demands a compassionate vision that enables the Church to see things from the side of the poor and powerless and to assess lifestyle, policies, and social institutions in terms of their impact on the poor. It summons the Church also to be an instrument in assisting people to experience the liberating power of God in their own lives so that they may respond to the Gospel in freedom and in dignity. (No. 52)

Drawing on Scripture, the bishops provide four points that summarize the grounds for and meaning of the preferential option for the poor in Catholic social thought. First, Jesus provides the mandate for the preferential option for the poor through his own example. Second, the biblical notion of poverty is connected to the state of powerlessness and marginalization. Third, the poor and vulnerable provide a vantage point from which to evaluate social structures and policies. Fourth, the Church's social mission involves being an instrument of God's liberating love for the vulnerable.

Catholic Campaign for Human Development

The USCCB's commitment to alleviating poverty predates their articulation of their economic justice in 1986 in *Economic Justice for All*. One of the most successful of the bishops' efforts is the Catholic Campaign for Human Development (CCHD), the largest privately funded self-help program for people living in poverty in the United States. The CCHD has distributed more than four hundred million dollars to various groups since its establishment in 1970. Unlike other Catholic-sponsored charitable organizations that offer direct assistance to those living in poverty, the CCHD's emphasis on social justice looks for long-term solutions that address the roots of poverty. The CCHD has developed into

a unique program that directs its efforts to the empowerment of impoverished communities through self-led projects aimed at social change. Specifically, it funds community organizing efforts, new businesses in impoverished communities, and nonprofit programs that are led by the people most affected by the service. The USCCB manifests the principle of participation in the way they direct CCHD funds:

For the purposes of CCHD funding, the participation of poor people in the shaping and ongoing direction of organizations is a central criterion. While "advisory" groups may also strengthen an organization, poor and low income people must have and maintain a strong voice in the organization's leadership both in terms of its governance structure and policy decisions, specially through their direct participation in the board of directors.¹⁰

Although the CCHD funds programs run by organizations that are not Catholic, it requires recipients to agree to promote the principles of Catholic social thought. In addition, the bishops see the CCHD as a vehicle to promote subsidiarity: "[The] CCHD focuses on local communities seeking to give voice to those closest to problems of poverty, as these communities address economic injustice working with local, state or national institutions to address the causes of poverty."¹¹ The rationale behind subsidiarity is that the people who are the most affected by social issues are the ones who have the best understanding of what they need. Following this rationale, social change should be led by the individuals most immediately affected by that change. Guided by the principle of subsidiarity and the preferential option for the poor, this approach to poverty promotes participation among communities that have been marginalized.

10. CCHD Basic Principles of Catholic Mission, available online at <http://www.usccb.org/about/catholic-campaign-for-human-development/grants/cchd-basic-principles-of-catholic-mission.cfm>.

11. CCHD, "Catholic Identity," available online at <http://www.usccb.org/about/catholic-campaign-for-human-development/frequently-asked-questions.cfm>.

The Catholic Worker Movement

The Catholic Worker movement is one of the most well-known, lay-led Catholic initiatives to serve and advocate for people living in poverty. Activist and journalist, Dorothy Day started the Catholic Worker with her friend, Peter Maurin in 1933 as a way to provide hospitality and basic necessities to people living in poverty. Day and other Catholic Workers embraced radical simplicity to live in community with the poor. *The Catholic Worker* was also the name of the newspaper they founded to promote nonviolence and social justice from a Catholic perspective. Today, the Catholic Worker movement includes many small communities across the United States that, inspired by the gospel and the example of Dorothy Day, choose to live and serve alongside people living in poverty.

Reading the Signs of the Times: Poverty and Empowerment

This section will further explore poverty and the economic life in the United States, focusing particularly on wealth inequality. It will provide information about the widening gap between the wealthy and the impoverished that can contribute to contemporary social analysis and explore theologian James Bailey's use of Catholic social thought to advocate for empowering the poor through asset building.

The 2010 US census reported a poverty rate of 15.1 percent of the US population, the highest rate of poverty recorded in fifty-two years of government measuring. This means that over forty-six million Americans (one in seven of the population) were living in poverty in 2010.¹² These numbers reveal only a part of the problem. Some economists argue that the way the official poverty threshold is

12. US Census Bureau 2010 Poverty Report available online at http://www.census.gov/newsroom/releases/archives/income_wealth/cb11-157.html.

measured in the United States is inadequate. Since the mid-1960s, the US government has employed the same method for measuring poverty, making slight adjustments for price changes. The poverty threshold is established by estimating the cost of food on a low-income budget. Assuming that a family spends one third of its income on food, the poverty threshold is three times the estimated food budget for a family, with the size of family taken into consideration. One of the limitations of this method is that it fails to take into account the economic changes that have occurred in the past fifty years. Today, economists point out, a typical US family spends more money on housing, transportation, and child care than fifty years ago when the poverty measure was developed. Therefore, it is inaccurate to assume that a family can still budget one-third of its income on food.¹³ In fact, people living below or near the poverty line are forced to make difficult decisions between paying for basic necessities and making long-term investments in education, homeownership, and retirement.

Although millions in the United States live near or below the poverty line, the United States is home to some of the wealthiest people in the world. Economists have noted the growing wealth disparity between the richest people in the United States and the majority of the population. The Economic Policy Institute measured wealth gain for the top 1 percent of the United States and found that this group secured 59.9 percent of the wealth gain (wages and capital income) between 1979 and 2007. An even smaller group, those representing the top 0.1 percent of the population secured 36 percent of wealth gain in the same period. This trend has concentrated the majority of wealth in the hands of a relatively small number of people. In 2009, the wealthiest 1 percent of the US population held 225 times the wealth of the median US household.¹⁴

13. Jared Bernstein, "Economic Opportunity and Poverty in America," (February 26, 2007) Economic Policy Institute, available online at http://www.epi.org/publication/wealthfare_circumstances_econ_oppty_and_poverty/.

14. Lawrence Mishel and Josh Bivens, "Occupy Wall Streeters Are Right about Skewed Economic Rewards in the United States," (October 26, 2011) Economic Policy Institute, available online at <http://www.epi.org/publication/bp331-occupy-wall-street/>.

The shrinking middle class and growing wealth gap in the United States poses a number of ethical concerns. First, many people are unable to own their own homes and make long-term investments. Without the opportunity to build assets (homeownership, retirement, etc.), low-income people have limited opportunities to rise out of poverty. The US government provides a number of asset-building incentives—tax deductions or exemptions for mortgage interest, financial investments, and 401k retirement savings. However, many of these incentives exclude people who are unemployed, underemployed, or whose income does not allow them to make long-term investments. Theologian James Bailey points out the injustice of this situation, arguing the following:

The United States already has in place a variety of initiatives that, taken together, constitute a vigorous and broad-based asset-building policy. The problem is that the beneficiaries of these policies are almost exclusively the nonpoor. Indeed, the current asset-based initiatives are so focused on the nonpoor that it would be accurate to characterize them as a "preferential option for the nonpoor."¹⁵

Bailey does not argue for an end to such asset-building programs, but rather stresses the need for broader participation among lower-income people. He sees asset building as an essential way to empower people to escape the cycle of poverty.

Bailey draws on Catholic social thought to emphasize the importance of asset building to alleviate poverty. Specifically, he argues that the themes of the common good, participation, and the preferential option for the poor all encourage broadened ownership and wealth distribution. Catholic social thought, he argues, also provides a framework for economic life that challenges the individualism that fuels the wealth gap in the United States. Referring to the common good, Bailey writes, "To the degree that ownership is correlated with greater participation at all levels of society, expanding the number of owners not only contributes to the individual good of these

15. James Bailey, *Rethinking Poverty: Income, Assets, and the Catholic Social Justice Tradition* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2010), 18.

new owners but also to the good of all members of society.”¹⁶ This understanding of ownership fits well with the USCCB’s emphasis on participation as a central characteristic of a just economy. It also speaks to the importance of the preferential option for the poor because within the framework of the common good, empowering the economically marginalized contributes to the flourishing of all.

Summary and Integration for Service Learners

This chapter traced the development of the preferential option for the poor in the Catholic social tradition. Rooted in Scripture, this theme became prominent in Catholic social thought through the influence of Latin American liberation theology. Today, the preferential option for the poor provides a basis for contemporary CST on economic justice. This is especially evident in the way that the USCCB has addressed poverty and economic life in the United States. This chapter also explored the USCCB’s response to poverty through CCHD and their concern about the inequalities between the wealthy and impoverished in the United States today. Now that you have learned about CST as it relates to poverty and economic justice, revisit your responses to the questions at the beginning of this chapter. Would you answer any questions differently? Has the chapter challenged any of your ideas or assumptions about poverty and what should be done to address it? Use the following vignette and questions to practice aspects of the see-judge-act process in relation to this topic.

Navigating through Poverty

Service-Learning Vignette

A student serving meals at a residential program for families transitioning from homelessness met a woman who challenged some of his assumptions about poverty. The woman, a single mother of three, said that her family became homeless after she lost her job at a grocery store. She said she was fired after having to miss several days of work to care

for her son who suffers from chronic ear infections. Making minimum wage, she could not afford to hire a babysitter to care for him and take him to the doctor. Living paycheck to paycheck, she said, did not allow her to save up for emergencies or periods of unemployment.

See: Social Analysis

- What are some social injustices that may be contributing to this woman’s experience of homelessness? In addition to poverty, what other factors might contribute to her vulnerability?
- What obstacles might be preventing her from fully participating in the common good?

Judge: Ethical Reflection

- Using the criterion of participation as a measure of economic justice, how would you critique the social injustices you noted in answering the first question?
- How might the application of the preferential option for the poor have helped the woman in the vignette avoid homelessness? How might it be helping her now?

Act: Promoting Justice

- Based on what you have learned about CST’s option for the poor and poverty in the United States today, what ideas might you have for alleviating poverty? What elements are essential for an anti-poverty measure to work?
- How do you distinguish actions oriented toward charity and those oriented toward social justice? From your perspective, what is the role of each in implementing the principle of CST that calls for giving preference to the poor?

Suggestions for Further Social Analysis in a Service-Learning Context

- Using recent census data, research the median income for the neighborhood in which a service-learning setting you are familiar with is located. How does this income data compare with data for the United States in general and for the state and city in which the neighborhood is located?

16. *Ibid.*, 49.

- Identify some programs (private and public) aimed at assisting the poor or alleviating poverty. Establish criteria for assessing the success of these programs, and then evaluate them on that basis. What factors contribute to success?
- Compare the median income of people living in the neighborhood in which a service-learning setting you are familiar with is located with the estimated living expenses offered by the Consumer Expenditure Survey (www.bls.gov/cex) for the same geographically area. What do you notice?

For Further Reading on Catholic Social Thought and Poverty

- Bailey, James. *Rethinking Poverty: Income, Assets, and the Catholic Social Justice Tradition*. Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2010.
- Bane, Mary Jo, and Lawrence Mead. *Lifting Up the Poor: A Dialogue on Religion, Poverty and Welfare Reform*. Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press, 2003.
- Groody, Daniel G. ed. *The Option for the Poor in Christian Theology*. Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2007.
- Massaro, Thomas. *United States Welfare Policy: A Catholic Response*. Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2007.
- O'Neill, William. "Poverty in the United States." In *Resources for Social and Cultural Analysis: Reading the Signs of the Times*, Edited by T. Howland Sanks and John Coleman. New York: Paulist Press, 1993.