
Consecrated Life and Option for the Poor: Witnessing to Christ's Pre-existent Love and Incarnate Solidarity

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Abstract: The incarnation of Christ is a radical expression of the option for the poor. This theological position is based on the pre-existent status of the Word (Who was in the form of God- Divinity) and His incarnation- Kenosis (Who truly assumed the human flesh and nature in its entirety) that find their unity in the Person of Jesus Christ. The selfless act of Christ demonstrates His option for the poor because He accepted poverty, weakness, and death in recognition of the pain and needs of poor humanity. This paper argues that the pre-existent status of the Word and His incarnation are the first considerations in a discourse on the option for the poor in relation to consecrated life. The work begins with an understanding of the option for the poor and further studies the demands of consecrated life in relation to living out the

vow of poverty and the significance of witnessing. While there are several independent papers on consecrated life and option for the poor, this work carves its niche by connecting the two through its response to two fundamental questions: Is there a connection between consecrated life and option for the poor? Is option for the poor a fundamental dimension of consecrated life? The hermeneutic, analytical and thematic methods of inquiry were employed to guide the development of this paper. The paper argues that consecrated life has a fundamental space for the poor based on the vow of poverty and the indispensability of witnessing to Christ whom they have chosen to follow more closely.

Keywords: Consecrated Life, Option for the Poor, Incarnation, *Kenosis*, Evangelical Counsels.

La vida consagrada y la opción por los pobres: testimonio del amor preexistente y de la solidaridad encarnada de Cristo

Resumen: La encarnación de Cristo es una expresión radical de la opción por los pobres. Esta posición teológica se basa en el estatus preexistente del Verbo (Quien tuvo la forma de Dios-Divinidad) y Su encarnación-Kénosis (Quien verdaderamente asumió la carne humana y la naturaleza en su totalidad) que encuentran su unidad en la Persona de Jesucristo. El acto desinteresado de Cristo demuestra su opción por los pobres porque aceptó la pobreza, la debilidad y la muerte en reconocimiento del dolor y las necesidades de la humanidad pobre. Este artículo sostiene que el estatus preexistente del Verbo y su encarnación son las primeras consideraciones en un discurso sobre la opción por los pobres en relación a la vida consagrada. El trabajo comienza con una comprensión de la op-

ción por los pobres y profundiza en los estudios de las demandas de la vida consagrada en relación con la vivencia del voto de pobreza y el significado del testimonio. Si bien existen varios artículos independientes sobre la vida consagrada y la opción por los pobres, este trabajo se hace un hueco conectando ambas. Se emplearon métodos de investigación hermenéuticos, analíticos y temáticos para guiar el desarrollo de este artículo. El artículo sostiene que la vida consagrada tiene un espacio fundamental para los pobres basado en el voto de pobreza y en la indispensabilidad del testimonio de Cristo, a quien han elegido seguir más de cerca.

Palabras clave: Vida Consagrada, Opción por los Pobres, Encarnación, Kenosis, Consejos Evangélicos

Introduction

The Christian faith, right from the time of Christ has a unique consideration for the poor and vulnerable. Jesus had a special place in His heart for them, and the Gospels are replete with stories of how He helped the poor in their need. The passage of Scripture on the Beatitudes, the last judgment narratives, the story of the Good Samaritan, among others, summarize the importance of Christian service to the poor¹. The Second Vatican Council illustrates the strength of a Christian's commitment to the marginalized. At the opening line of *Gaudium et Spes*, it reads: "The

¹ California Catholic Conference, 2015.

joys and the hopes, the griefs and the anxieties of the [people] of this age, especially those who are poor or in any way afflicted, these too are the joys and hopes, the griefs and anxieties of the followers of Christ.”² The Code of Canon Law also holds that “The Christian faithful are also obliged to promote social justice and, mindful of the precept of the Lord, to assist the poor.”³ The code indicates that it is an obligation, on the part of those who call themselves Christian, first and foremost to care for the poor and vulnerable⁴.

While the promotion of the good of the poor has always been at the heart of Christianity, the popular term “preferential option for the poor” is relatively new. It is considered one of the major developments in Catholic Social Teaching in the 20th century. The concept was first used in 1968 by the Superior General of the Jesuits, Father Pedro Arrupe, in a letter to the members of the Society of Jesus. It was later used in a document from a meeting of the Conference of Latin American Bishops held in Medellin, Columbia in reference to a trend throughout biblical texts, where there is a demonstrable preference given to powerless individuals who live on the margins of society:

The preferential option for the poor is to proclaim Christ as the Savior who illuminates their dignity, helps them in their efforts toward liberation from all deficiencies, and brings them into communion with God and one another by living in evangelical poverty⁵.

The concept was embraced by the liberation theology movement, which closely associated the poor and vulnerable with Jesus Himself⁶, citing Matthew 25, “Whatever you did for the least of these, you did for me.”⁷

² Pope Paul VI, 1965: 1.

³ Code Of Canon Law, 1999: 222. 2.

⁴ U. S. Catholic, 2015.

⁵ CELAM, 1985: 1153

⁶ Julio Lois, 1991: 9; Donald Dorr, 1992: 12; Gustavo Gutiérrez & Gerhard L. Müller, 2004: 20; Gustavo Gutiérrez, 1986: 19; 2003: 30; 1990: 309.

⁷ Pope John Paul II, 1991: 1-100

In 1991, Pope John Paul II used the term in his encyclical *Centesimus Annus*, which celebrated the 100th anniversary of Pope Leo XIII's encyclical *Rerum Novarum*. In this usage, the concept was expanded to include spiritual as well as material poverty.

Today more than ever, the Church is aware that her social message will gain credibility more immediately from the witness of actions than as a result of its internal logic and consistency. This awareness is also a source of her preferential option for the poor, which is never exclusive or discriminatory towards other groups. This option is not limited to material poverty, since it is well known that there are many other forms of poverty, especially in modern society—not only economic but cultural and spiritual poverty as well. The Church's love for the poor, which is essential for her and a part of her constant tradition, impels her to give attention to a world in which poverty is threatening to assume massive proportions in spite of technological and economic progress. In the countries of the West, different forms of poverty are being experienced by groups which live on the margins of society, by the elderly and the sick, by the victims of consumerism, and more recently by so many refugees and migrants. In the developing countries, tragic crises loom on the horizon unless internationally coordinated measures are taken before it is too late⁸.

The concept was also later embraced by Pope Benedict XVI, who extended the understanding of the poor to include all those who are marginalized in society⁹.

The beauty of this theological reflection is that, while reflecting on the Christian responsibility towards the poor, it does not focus on the entirety of the Christian faithful. It rather pays attention to the consecrated life to mark out the unique connection between consecrated life and the preferential option for the poor. It responds to two major questions: Is

⁸ Pope John Paul II, 1991: 57.

⁹ U.S. Catholic, 2015.

there a connection between consecrated life and option for the poor? Is option for the poor a fundamental dimension of consecrated life? This notwithstanding, the paper will begin with an understanding of Option for the poor and consecrated life with due consideration for the primary questions looming at the horizon of this work.

Theology of option for the poor

The option for the poor is an option that is not an option. It is a basic principle of Catholic Social Teaching, and therefore, not an option. Saint Augustine refers to it as a moral obligation. Thus, in his sermons, he teaches: “give to the poor”¹⁰, “think of the poor”¹¹, “Christ ... here, among us, still suffers hunger, thirst and nakedness: here he is poor and in the poor”¹². Reinforcing this perspective, St Gregory the Great (540-605 CE) refers to the option for the poor as a payment of the debt of justice that we owe one another¹³.

Option for the poor can be understood as a Catholic social teaching that highlights the significance of giving the needs of the poor and their rights precedence over other considerations. It is founded on the idea of solidarity, which holds that all individuals have equal dignity and ought to be treated with kindness and respect. Oscar Romero describes it as coming to know reality “from the perspective of the poor” and following in the footsteps of the Lord Jesus¹⁴. He adds that “it is the poor who tell us what the world is, and what the church’s service to the world should be.”¹⁵ Gustavo Gutiérrez describes it as a theocentric option: “as Christians, we base that commitment fundamentally on the God of our faith. It is a *theocentric*, prophetic option we make, one which strikes its roots deep in the

¹⁰ Augustine, Saint, 2001: 61,13

¹¹ Augustine, Saint, 2001: 25, 8; 122,6

¹² Augustine, Saint, 2001: 123,4

¹³ Catechism of the Catholic Church, 1994: 588.

¹⁴ Oscar Romero, 1985: 179; 1978.

¹⁵ Oscar Romero, 1985: 179; Gustavo Gutiérrez, 2009: 217-326.

gratuity of God's love and is demanded by that love."¹⁶ Gregory Baum refers to option for the poor as a contemporary form of discipleship¹⁷.

The use of the word option does not undermine the importance of this dimension of our Christian faith. In English, option implies choice, that is, choosing one of a set of available options. Within the context of this theology, "the option for the poor uses option in the way that Karl Rahner talked about the *fundamental option*. A firm and persevering commitment – while this involves a choice, it is not optional but morally required. Rahner argued that we can make a fundamental option for the good, for God in the core of our being that is then born out in our lives. Option is about making a firm and persevering commitment, a moral imperative"¹⁸.

Christological dimension of option for the poor

Jesus showed his compassion in a number of ways, demonstrating his genuine concern for the underprivileged and oppressed. He shared with the impoverished the good news of God's love and salvation. He touched the leper, healed the sick, and restored sight to the blind (Matthew 11:4-6); He invited the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind to his feasts and lived among them (Luke 14:13); He lived in poverty, with few material belongings; and he declared, "The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because He has anointed me to preach good news to the poor" (Luke 4:18).

He rode a borrowed colt, preached from borrowed boats, and was laid to rest in a borrowed tomb. In addition to living among the impoverished, Jesus encouraged people to do the same by stating, "If you want to be perfect, go, sell your possessions and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven" (Matthew 19:21). Additionally, Christ stated in Matthew 5:3 that "Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God" and in Matthew 25:40 that "Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of these least of these brothers of mine, you did for me." Above all,

¹⁶ Gustavo Gutiérrez, 1993: 240

¹⁷ Gregory Baum, 1994: 67

¹⁸ Meghan Clark, 2013

Jesus became poor on the cross as a voluntary act to provide us with the riches of his grace. Thus, Scripture says: “though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, that you through his poverty might become rich” 2 Cor 8:9.

It is precisely in this sense that Pope Benedict XVI taught that: “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 (2 Cor 8:9).”¹⁹ Put in another way, it is a commitment that “...is born out of our faith in Jesus Christ, the God who became human.”²⁰ Antonio Machado makes it an important part of the teachings of Christ: “Christ teaches: your neighbor you will love as yourself, but never forget that they are an other”²¹.

The option for the poor, expresses in a profound manner the free and demanding love of God, which Jesus had commanded: “Love one another as I have loved you” (Jn 13:34). This love is universal and excludes no one, including the least ones of history, the oppressed and the insignificant. This love also makes present the mystery hidden for all time but now unveiled (Rom 16:25–26). beyond this expression, it is also a manner of walking with Jesus the Messiah²². In one of his homilies Archbishop Oscar Romero observed: “There is a criterion for knowing whether God is close to us or far away: all those who worry about the hungry, the naked, the poor, the disappeared, the tortured, the imprisoned—about any suffering human being—are close to God”²³.

Consecrated life in the Church

Lumen Gentium gave due consideration to the role and mission of consecrated persons in the life of the Church. Although it speaks of the incorporation of the faithful into the Church, the grace of divine adoption,

¹⁹ Pope Benedict XVI, 2007: 3

²⁰ V Conferencia General Del Episcopado Latinoamericano y Del Caribe, 2007: 391

²¹ Antonio Machado, 1979: 273.

²² John XXIII, 1962: 23

²³ Oscar Romero, 1978: 3

and the universal call to holiness²⁴, it explains how the vocation of the religious compares with and differs from the common one of the laity and how they express in the Church a type of Christian and evangelical life that is unique²⁵.

It defined the identity of a religious in terms of *being* conformed to Christ than of *doing*²⁶. The Council's argumentation takes baptism as its starting point, recognizing that with the profession of the evangelical counsels, those who consecrate themselves to the service of God in the Church can derive "more abundant fruit from this baptismal grace"²⁷.

Consecrated life is understood as an ecclesial vocation and does not constitute a path of perfection marked by individualism but shows a clear ecclesial rooting. The choice of Evangelical Counsels represents for the individual, and for the whole Church, an opportunity for enrichment and a privileged "place" where grace is manifested²⁸. It is a spiritual capital that profits not only "the entire Body of Christ"²⁹ but also those who embrace it³⁰.

The Consecrated life is a reality and also a sign. It is a sign because of the eschatological tension that runs through it³¹, given that the vows of chastity, poverty, and obedience constitute an anticipation of the condition of perfect and definitive communion to which the "children of God" will be introduced in the last times. It is also a reality because the religious, by giving themselves to God without fleeing from the world (*fuga mundi*), also acquire a different freedom in the way they engage themselves, material goods, and others³². It reflects the charismatic character of the church, constituting a special gift with which the Spirit has enriched the Church

²⁴ Pope Paul VI, 1964: 1, 43, 47.

²⁵ Pope Paul VI, 1964: 39

²⁶ Michael Czerny, 2021: 87-106

²⁷ Pope Paul VI, 1964: 44

²⁸ Kanu A. I., 2011: 161-163; 2015: 3-14; 2016: 31-40; 2018: 35-43; 2019: 125-149; 2024: 1083-1101

²⁹ Pope Paul VI, 1964: 43

³⁰ Pope Paul VI, 1964: 43

³¹ Pope Paul VI, 1964: 46

³² Pope Paul VI, 1964: 46

and characterized her charismatic structure, since it “undeniably belongs to its life and holiness”³³.

In 1965, the words “a life consecrated by the profession of the counsels”³⁴ appeared for the first time in an official Church document. The document makes explicit the Christological foundation of religious life³⁵ and indicates the following of Christ as the “highest rule” and the “ultimate norm”³⁶ which governs it. The primary purpose of the consecrated Life is union with God, to which both contemplation and apostolic zeal must be directed³⁷. The multiple forms of consecrated life—contemplative, active, monastic, and lay³⁸, show how great a “variety of gifts” the Spirit embellishes the Church, making her appear “like a spouse adorned for her husband”³⁹.

For constant renewal, the decree recommends that each institute acquire knowledge of its origins and history, which will help to attune the original charismatic intuition to “the changed conditions of our time”⁴⁰. It also calls for more respect towards the “common life.” It holds that what binds religious together is love for God, and this unity “is a visible pledge that Christ will return”⁴¹. It holds that the very fruitfulness of religious life depends on the quality of life in common⁴² since fraternal unity is “a source of great apostolic energy”⁴³.

In the apostolic exhortation *Evangelica Testificatio* of 1971, Pope Paul VI sought to respond to the climate of “anxiety”, “the boldness of certain arbitrary transformations”⁴⁴, and those questioning the usefulness of con-

³³ Pope Paul VI, 1964: 44

³⁴ Pope Paul VI, 1964: 2.

³⁵ Pope Paul VI, 1964: 1.

³⁶ Pope Paul VI, 1964: 2

³⁷ Pope Paul VI, 1964: 5

³⁸ Pope Paul VI, 1964: 7-11

³⁹ Pope Paul VI, 1964: 1.

⁴⁰ Pope Paul VI, 1964: 2

⁴¹ Pope Paul VI, 1964: 15.

⁴² Michael Czerny, 2021: 87-106

⁴³ Pope Paul VI, 1964: 15.

⁴⁴ Pope Paul VI, 1971: 2.

secrated life for the present time⁴⁵. The pope reiterates the importance of rediscovering the “charisms of your founders”⁴⁶, because on its identification depends those “fundamental options” which make it possible “continually . . . to revitalize external forms”⁴⁷. Paul VI chose to include, in relation to the vow of poverty, a reference to the preferential option for the poor made by the Council. This requires a constant call to love effectively and to shun selfishness, for conversion of mind and heart and “for liberation from all temporal encumbrances”⁴⁸.

He observed that the Religious are called to live poverty as a choice, making their own the condition of the Son of Man who “has nowhere to rest his head” (Luke 9:58). The work of the religious, therefore, becomes a means to helping the poor and not for self-satisfaction. The duty to “help the poor through work” redefines common life and shows how poverty can be “really lived by pooling goods”⁴⁹. The preferential option for the poor ultimately sheds new light on the way of living the vow of poverty and informs common life⁵⁰.

Spes non confundit: contextualizing the conversation

In *Spes Non Confundit* (Hope Does Not Disappoint), a Bull of Indiction of the Ordinary Jubilee of the Year 2025 was given in Rome, at Saint John Lateran, on 9 May, the Solemnity of the Ascension of our Lord Jesus Christ, in the year 2024, by Pope Francis. In this document, he emphasizes the importance of believers being tangible signs of hope for those of our brothers and sisters who experience hardships of any kind.

I ask with all my heart that hope be granted to the billions of the *poor*, who often lack the essentials of life. Before the constant tide of new forms of impoverishment, we can easily grow inured

⁴⁵ Pope Paul VI, 1971: 3.

⁴⁶ Pope Paul VI, 1971: 11.

⁴⁷ Pope Paul VI, 1971: 12.

⁴⁸ Pope Paul VI, 1971: 17.

⁴⁹ Pope Paul VI, 1971: 21.

⁵⁰ Michael Czerny, 2021: 87-106

and resigned. Yet we must not close our eyes to the dramatic situations that we now encounter all around us, not only in certain parts of the world. Each day we meet people who are poor or impoverished; they may even be our next-door neighbours. Often they are homeless or lack sufficient food for the day. They suffer from exclusion and indifference on the part of many⁵¹.

In his Encyclical Letter *Fratelli Tutti*⁵², and *Laudato Si*⁵³, Pope Francis observed that it is scandalous that in a world possessed of immense resources, destined largely to producing weapons, the poor continue to be:

...the majority of the planet's population, billions of people. These days they are mentioned in international political and economic discussions, but one often has the impression that their problems are brought up as an afterthought, a question which gets added almost out of duty or in a tangential way, if not treated merely as collateral damage. Indeed, when all is said and done, they frequently remain at the bottom of the pile⁵⁴.

The first group of the poor deserving of our attention are the prisoners whose freedom is restricted and respect denied. The Pope refers to it as an ancient appeal, one drawn from the Word of God, whose wisdom remains ever timely and which calls for acts of clemency and liberation that enable new beginnings: "You shall hallow the fiftieth year and you shall proclaim liberty throughout the land to all its inhabitants" (Lev 25:10). This was later taken up by the prophet Isaiah: "The Lord has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed, to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives and release to the prisoners, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour" (Is 61:1-2). Jesus made those words his own at

⁵¹ Pope Francis, 2024: 15

⁵² Pope Francis, 2020: 262

⁵³ Pope Francis, 2015: 1-50

⁵⁴ Pope Francis, 2015: 49

the beginning of his ministry, presenting himself as the fulfilment of the “year of the Lord’s favour” (Lk 4:18-19).

I think of *prisoners* who, deprived of their freedom, daily feel the harshness of detention and its restrictions, lack of affection and, in more than a few cases, lack of respect for their persons. I propose that in this Jubilee Year governments undertake initiatives aimed at restoring hope; forms of amnesty or pardon meant to help individuals regain confidence in themselves and in society; and programmes of reintegration in the community, including a concrete commitment to respect for law⁵⁵.

The Roman Pontiff also speaks of extending clemency towards the sick, especially those affected by illnesses or disabilities that severely restrict their personal independence and freedom. He calls the care given to them “a hymn to human dignity, a song of hope”⁵⁶ that calls for the choral participation of society as a whole. He writes further:

Signs of hope should also be shown to the *sick*, at home or in hospital. Their sufferings can be allayed by the closeness and affection of those who visit them. Works of mercy are also works of hope that give rise to immense gratitude. Gratitude should likewise be shown to all those healthcare workers who, often in precarious conditions, carry out their mission with constant care and concern for the sick and for those who are most vulnerable⁵⁷.

The Jubilee is also an important moment for the youth, who are the joy and hope of the Church and the world. Pope Francis teaches that the Church should make greater efforts to reach out to them, and with renewed passion, demonstrate care and concern for adolescents, students and young couples, the rising generation. He writes:

⁵⁵ Pope Francis, 2024: 15

⁵⁶ Pope Francis, 2024: 11

⁵⁷ Pope Francis, 2024: 11

Signs of hope are also needed by those who are the very embodiment of hope, namely, *the young*. Sadly, they often see their dreams and aspirations frustrated. We must not disappoint them, for the future depends on their enthusiasm. It is gratifying to see the energy they demonstrate, for example, by rolling up their sleeves and volunteering to help when disasters strike and people are in need. Yet it is sad to see young people who are without hope, who face an uncertain and unpromising future, who lack employment or job security, or realistic prospects after finishing school. Without the hope that their dreams can come true, they will inevitably grow discouraged and listless. Escaping into drugs, risk-taking and the pursuit of momentary pleasure does greater harm to them in particular, since it closes them to life's beauty and richness, and can lead to depression and even self-destructive actions⁵⁸.

Another group of people Pope Francis thinks the Church should be a sign of hope to during this Jubilee year are the immigrants who leave their homelands behind in search of a better life for themselves and their families. He teaches that:

Their expectations must not be frustrated by prejudice and rejection. A spirit of welcome, which embraces everyone with respect for his or her dignity, should be accompanied by a sense of responsibility, lest anyone be denied the right to a dignified existence. *Exiles, displaced persons and refugees*, whom international tensions force to emigrate in order to avoid war, violence and discrimination, ought to be guaranteed security and access to employment and education, the means they need to find their place in a new social context⁵⁹.

He strongly believes that the Christian community should always be prepared to defend the rights of those who are most vulnerable, opening wide its doors to welcome them, lest anyone ever be robbed of the hope of a better future.

⁵⁸ Pope Francis, 2024: 12

⁵⁹ Pope Francis, 2024: 13

The elderly also has a special place in this document of Pope Francis. He urges that they should not be left to feel lonely and abandoned:

The *elderly*, who frequently feel lonely and abandoned, also deserve signs of hope. Esteem for the treasure that they are, their life experiences, their accumulated wisdom and the contribution that they can still make, is incumbent on the Christian community and civil society, which are called to cooperate in strengthening the covenant between generations. Here I would also mention *grandparents*, who represent the passing on of faith and wisdom to the younger generation. May they find support in the gratitude of their children and the love of their grandchildren, who discover in them their roots and a source of understanding and encouragement⁶⁰.

From the foregoing, the categorization of the poor in the document of Pope Francis goes beyond those who cannot afford to feed themselves to include the sick who are afflicted by disabilities, prisoners whose freedom is limited, the elderly who are lonely, young people who require the attention of the Church, migrants who are outside of their home countries. In the letter of the Institute of Consecrated Life and Society of Apostolic Life to Consecrated Persons all over the world on 29th June 2023, two points stand out for the engagement of consecrated persons during the Jubilee Year: “Commitment to the *Least*: Listening to the cry of the poor”⁶¹, and “Universal fraternity- solidarity”⁶². These are strong invitations to consecrated persons for strong involvement in making the poor a priority during the Jubilee Year.

Consecrated life and the option for the poor

At the event of the International Symposium on the “Management of Ecclesiastical Goods of the Institutes of Consecrated Life and Socie-

⁶⁰ Pope Francis, 2024: 14

⁶¹ Institute Of Consecrated Life and Society of Apostolic Life, 2023: 1.

⁶² Institute Of Consecrated Life and Society of Apostolic Life, 2023: 1.

ties of Apostolic Life, for the Service of Humanity and the Mission of the Church”, Pope Francis, addressing religious men and women, reminded them that consecrated persons are:

A prophetic voice and living witness to the newness which is Christ, and that they have to conform themselves to the One who made himself poor so that we might become rich by his poverty. This loving poverty is solidarity, sharing and charity and is expressed in moderation, in the quest for justice and in contentment with a simple life⁶³.

The address of Pope Francis indicates the basic personal and institutional attitudes that must occupy an important place in the documents and personal and institutional lives of consecrated persons. These basic attitudes include solidarity, sharing, charity, moderation, justice and contentment with a simple life, etc. These ensure that our poverty is not theoretical but in consonance and communion with the poorest of this world. This is the kind of poverty that we learn by touching the flesh of the poor Christ in the humble, in the poor, in the sick, in children⁶⁴. It is in this sense that Pope Francis invites consecrated persons to be for the Church and the world “the outposts of care for all of the poor and for all material, moral and spiritual poverty, and examples in overcoming every form of egoism through the logic of the Gospel which teaches us to trust in the Providence of God.”⁶⁵

In understanding the vow of poverty, the consecrated person seeks to imitate Christ and embody the beatitude of the poor. This vow is not just about material possessions but encompasses an internal, personal decision to live a life identical to that of Christ. It is a response to the materialistic attitude in the world, emphasizing sensitivity to the needs of others. While some religious congregations possess significant wealth and attract attention from civil society, many still exemplify the unity between evangelical poverty and the option for the poor.

⁶³ Pope Francis, 2014: 1.

⁶⁴ Angel Fernandez Artime, 2016.

⁶⁵ Pope Francis, 2014: 1.

The evangelical vow of poverty requires consecrated persons to demonstrate solidarity with the neglected in society. It calls for self-denial, restraint, and a preferential love for the poor. Consecrated life shares in the radical poverty embraced by the Lord and fulfils a specific role in the salvific mystery of his Incarnation and redeeming death.

There is an ontological radical option for the poor seen in the incarnation of Jesus, which is presented in the gospel of St. John. The preexistent status of the Word and his incarnation-kenosis find their unity in the Person of Jesus Christ. The Kenosis of Jesus Christ is about assuming truly the human flesh and nature in its entirety, understood from the viewpoint of his divinity. Christ is seen as an obedient servant who selflessly offered himself freely for others, characterized by humble obedience to the Father, leading to his death on the Cross. This selfless act demonstrates the option for the poor, as Christ accepted poverty, weakness, and death out of love, coming in contact with humanity and recognizing the pain and needs of the poor. This should be the first consideration when referring to the option for the poor, particularly for a consecrated person desiring to follow Christ intimately.

Consecrated persons are called in a special way to share Jesus with others not only through their lives and words but also through good deeds, and charitable, social and developmental works. In Jesus' reply to John the Baptist's inquiry as to whether he was the Messiah, he emphasized the importance of charity towards the poor: "Go and tell John what you hear and see: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised and the poor have good news brought to them" (Mt 11:4- 5)⁶⁶.

Saint Thérèse of Lisieux, writes that charity is at the heart of the life of the Church, and fundamental for all vocations: "I understood that the Church had a Heart and that this Heart was aflame with Love. I understood that Love alone stirred the members of the Church to act... I understood that Love encompassed all vocations, that Love was everything."⁶⁷

At the end of the Synod of Bishops on New Evangelization, Pope Benedict XVI cited the importance of the option for the poor.

⁶⁶ Pope Francis, 2013: 238-258; Pope John Paul II, 1990: 58; Pope Benedict XVI, 2011: 15; Arul Jesu Robin, 2017: 57-78

⁶⁷ Pope John Paul II, 2001: 42.

Jesus identifies himself with those in need, with the hungry, the thirsty, the stranger, the naked, the sick and those in prison. 'As you did it to one of the least of these my brethren, you did it to me' (Mt 25: 40). Love of God and love of neighbor have become one: in the least of the brethren we find Jesus himself, and in Jesus we find God" (*Deus caritas est*, 15). Today there are new poor and new faces of poverty: the hungry, the homeless, the sick and abandoned, drug addicts, migrants and the marginalized, political and environmental refugees, the indigenous peoples⁶⁸.

The Roman Pontiff added that:

The current economic crisis seriously affects the poor. Among the poorest in contemporary society are the victims of grievous loss of respect for the inviolable dignity of innocent human life. The preferential option for the poor leads us to seek out the poor and to work on their behalf so that they may feel at home in the Church. They are both recipients and actors in the New Evangelization⁶⁹.

Pope John Paul II in his famous Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Vita Consecrata*, speaks of the option for the poor as an important dimension of the mission of consecrated persons. He refers to them as a real proclamation of the Gospel inherited from Jesus of Nazareth (Lk 4:16-19). Thus, consecrated persons who wish to follow Jesus more closely and radically cannot but feel involved in a special way with him by living a life of poverty and embracing the cause of the poor⁷⁰.

Conclusion

The option for the poor is profoundly expressed through the incarnation of Christ. From the foregoing, this theological standpoint is rooted

⁶⁸ XIII Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod Of Bishops, 2012: 97-99.

⁶⁹ XIII Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod Of Bishops, 2012: 97-99.

⁷⁰ Pope John Paul II, 1996: 82.

in the pre-existing nature of the Word (who existed in the form of God - divine) and His embodiment - Kenosis (who genuinely took on human flesh and nature in its entirety), which are unified in the person of Jesus Christ. Christ's selfless act demonstrates His preference for the poor, as He embraced poverty, weakness, and death out of acknowledgement of the suffering and needs of impoverished humanity. At the heart of this paper is the understanding that the pre-existing nature of the Word and His embodiment are the primary considerations in discussing the option for the poor in relation to consecrated life. This is important as consecrated persons have decided to follow Jesus in a special way more closely.

This notwithstanding, the call for the commitment of consecrated persons to the needs of the poor and vulnerable of society is based on their decision to follow Jesus more closely, who though God became poor, embraced weakness and death in acknowledgement of the need and redemption of poor humanity. The Evangelical poverty of consecrated person, apart from being an internal, personal decision to live a life identical to that of Christ, is a response to the materialistic attitude in the world, emphasizing sensitivity to the needs of others. There is a unity between evangelical poverty and the option for the poor. It requires consecrated persons to demonstrate solidarity with the neglected in society and calls for self-denial, restraint, and a preferential love for the poor.

More so, the consideration for the poor by consecrated persons need begin from their various communities as "charity begins at home". Among consecrated persons are the sick, the elderly, those who feel excluded and depressed, the poor- those who work in the most difficult places and apostolates, the young, who require more attention and guidance, etc. The greatest witness in this regard need to manifest from within. This becomes in itself a living witness and power.

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