Option for the Poor and Vulnerable

The 10 second Summary:

WHAT DOES THE CHURCH SAY ABOUT THE OPTION FOR THE POOR AND VULNERABLE?

To make an option for the poor and vulnerable is to commit oneself to resisting the injustice, oppression, exploitation, and marginalization of people, problems that permeate so many aspects of public life. The option for the poor and vulnerable is a commitment to transforming society into a place where human rights and the dignity of all are respected. This option, or choice, can be made by individuals or by communities or even by a whole church. This “option” has theological, social, political and economic dimensions to it. Questions about the interests of those in positions of power and about a culture mired in materialism arise when one seeks to look at the causes of poverty and the reality of the poor and vulnerable.

WHERE DOES THIS TEACHING COME FROM?

- Scripture—Biblical source: rooted in scripture
- Tradition—Moral source: located in the Catholic tradition, shaped by the past and the present.
- Teaching—Ecclesial source: expressed in the Pope’s Encyclical letters, Apostolic letters, Apostolic exhortations, and the Bishops’ Pastoral letters, which respond to the issues of the day. (This source is often what is referred to as Catholic Social Teaching.)

How does this teaching connect with my life?

It provides:

- Principles for reflection;
- Criteria for judgment;
- Guidelines for action;
- Tools for conscience formation.

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### OPTION FOR THE POOR

#### WHAT ARE SOME OF THE HISTORICAL DEVELOPMENTS THAT CAUSED THE CHURCH TO TAKE NOTICE AND RESPOND TO THE PROBLEM OF POVERTY?²

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<th>What was the reality?</th>
<th>Document &amp; Year</th>
<th>What was presented?</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>There was a growing mass of urban poor as a result of exploitation from the industrial revolution.</td>
<td>The Condition of Labor (Rerum Novarum), 1891</td>
<td>This document was a cry of protest against the exploitation of poor workers. The Church took a moral stand against the injustices of the times.</td>
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<td>Wealth was becoming more and more concentrated into the hands of a few. This translated into increased political power also becoming more concentrated into the same hands.</td>
<td>The Reconstruction of the Social Order (Quadrigesimo Anno), 1931</td>
<td>The term “social justice” is affirmed for the first time in this document. The church becomes more aware of its prophetic role in the world, particularly as a voice for the poor and marginalized.</td>
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<td>The world had been experiencing rapid economic growth. It was the age of the atom, space exploration and the heavy threat of nuclear war. Many countries were completely left behind in the areas of economic growth and were suffering as a result. The arms race was beginning to be looked at as one cause of poverty.</td>
<td>Christianity and Social Progress (Mater et Magistra), 1961</td>
<td>It put the weight of the church on the side of a policy of social reforms in favor of the poor and deprived within each country and around the globe. This promoted the concept of the welfare state. This significant shift in direction would lay the foundation for “an option for the poor.”</td>
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<td>The Cold War was underway and the Cuban missile crisis was looming. The fragile and costly nature of peace was a central concern. A new preferential protection of those at the lower end of the social scale—especially the poor—was being called for.</td>
<td>Peace on Earth (Pacem in Terris), 1963</td>
<td>It challenged the advantages of those in positions of power and control who amassed wealth while others suffered at their hands. It is calling for unity between faith and action in the world. Peace is best guaranteed when appropriate rights and responsibilities are upheld and adhered to.</td>
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<td>An awareness of massive poverty at the global level emerges with an attempt to identify root causes. A new belief that countries could “grow” out of poverty was asserted. A movement from merely a notion of justice centered on the redistribution of existing wealth, to a model of justice centered on new resources from production and growth that could eradicate poverty.</td>
<td>The Development of Peoples (Populorum Progressio), 1967</td>
<td>A new treatment and articulation of the meaning of “authentic human development” emerged. It proposed an entirely new foundation for human development—not based on existing Western economic models and realities but centered on the person in community.</td>
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<td>“Development” has not solved the problem of growing poverty. Poverty is beginning to be recognized as structural—having to do with established power patterns (i.e., politics) and not just the functioning of the market.</td>
<td>A Call to Action (Octogesima Adveniens), 1971</td>
<td>The focus in this document shifts from economics to politics. There is a movement towards engagement in the political sphere and a call for new forms of democracy as a way of providing peaceful means of social change in bringing about a more just society.</td>
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<td>The gap between rich and poor countries is increasing. Workers are increasingly becoming the victims of injustice. The dominance of countries of the North is linked with the exploitation of countries of the South.</td>
<td>On Human Work (Laborem Exercens), 1981</td>
<td>A reflection on the nature of human work and the organization of economic activity is presented. The root causes of the issues are examined. Poverty and exploitation are the result of human action and must not be tolerated. An option for the poor requires alternatives that are just and truly human.</td>
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<td>The events of Eastern Europe in 1989 and the impact of the resulting fall of communism are a central underlying focus.</td>
<td>One Hundred Years (Centesimus Annus), 1991</td>
<td>The continuity of the teaching is stressed. The fall of communism is not to be seen as the triumph of capitalism. It holds a challenge to develop caring societies where the state protects the weak but does not destroy their initiative or make them dependent.</td>
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¹ For a complete analysis of these documents see, Option for the Poor: A Hundred Years of Vatican Social Teaching, by Donald Dorr. 
MORE ON OPTION FOR THE POOR AND VULNERABLE FROM CST

"If someone who has the riches of this world sees his brother in need and closes his heart to him, how does the love of God abide in him?” (1 Jn 3:17). It is well known how strong were the words used by the Fathers of the Church to describe the proper attitude of persons who possess anything towards persons in need. To quote Saint Ambrose: “You are not making a gift of your possessions to the poor person. You are handing over to him what is his. For what has been given in common for the use of all, you have arrogated to yourself. The world is given to all, and not only to the rich.”

On the Development of Peoples, #23

Those who are more influential because they have greater share of goods and common services should feel responsible for the weaker and be ready to share with them all they possess... the church feels called to take her stand beside the poor, to discern the justice of their requests and to help satisfy them, without losing sight of the good of groups in the context of the common good.

On Social Concern, #39

It will be necessary above all to abandon a mentality in which the poor--as individuals and as peoples--are considered a burden, as irksome intruders trying to consume what others have produced.

The Hundredth Year. #28

Let each one examine his/her conscience, a conscience that conveys a new message for our times. Is he/she prepared to support out of his/her own pocket works and undertaking organized in favor of the most destitute? Is he/she ready to pay higher taxes so that the public authorities can intensify their efforts in favor of development? Is he/she ready to pay a higher price for imported goods so that the producer may be more justly rewarded?

On the Development of Peoples. #48

Listening to the cry of those who suffer violence and are oppressed by unjust systems and structures, and hearing the appeal of a world that by its perversity contradicts the plan of its Creator, we have shared our awareness of the Church’s vocation to be present in the heart of the world by proclaiming the Good News to the poor, freedom to the oppressed, and joy to the afflicted.

Justice in the World, #5

A consistent theme of Catholic social teaching is the option or love of preference for the poor. Today, this preference has to be expressed in worldwide dimensions, embracing the immense numbers of the hungry, the needy, the homeless, those without medical care, and those without hope.

On Social Concern, #42

In teaching us charity, the Gospel instructs us in the preferential respect due to the poor and the special situation they have in society: the more fortunate should renounce some of their rights so as to place their goods more generously at the service of others.

A Call to Action, #23

Education for JUSTICE