



Option for the Poor and Compassion for the Vulnerable: why the two Bible-based principles should not be Conflated or Replaced

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Abstract

This article motivates for the retention of the option for the poor paradigm in response to Michel Temgo's (2018) proposal for its replacement with "compassion for the vulnerable". It argues that the two principles, "option for the poor" and "compassion for the vulnerable", are Bible-based with different functions in the Bible. For that reason, they should not be conflated. The option for the poor principle has, over five decades, undergirded theological activism against exploitation, poverty and injustice - what Gutierrez (1973) refers to as subhuman conditions of the poor. Its value for the poor and oppressed communities cannot be fully appreciated unless viewed from the perspective of its original context in Medellin (1968). Following an assessment of whether a paradigm shift is justified and a tracing of the foundations of the two principles in Luke's Gospel, the article concludes that there is no justification for a paradigm shift and that according to biblical evidence, the "option for the poor" is particular, while "compassion for the vulnerable" is general.

Keywords: option for the poor, preferential option for the poor, compassion for the vulnerable, Luke's Gospel, Medellin Conference. Puebla Conference.

Introduction

The issue of poverty appears to be "current" in every historical era. This is set to continue for as long as the binary of rich and poor exists. One is predicated on the other. Therefore, any notion of replacing the paradigm that has provided a theological and pastoral rationale for placing the poor in the centre of the church and theological activism for five decades, runs the risk of distorting the ministry of Jesus and betraying the cause of the poor. Even the Puebla meeting of 1979 had to accept that as irreplaceable. In light of this, Michel Temgo's (2018) proposal for a replacement of the "preferential option for the poor" with "compassion for the vulnerable" cannot be left unchallenged. The two are not the same albeit both are grounded in the scriptures. The proposed change is, in fact, fundamental in that it amounts to a paradigm shift, not a mere variation in phraseology. It has been the understanding, since Thomas Kuhn's (cf. 1962; 1970)¹ theory of paradigm and paradigm-shift, that a paradigm is replaced when it

¹ Owing to limited space and previous discourses that have exhausted the subject, I will not reinvent the wheel. Instead, I accept the principles involved, one pertaining to what precipitates a paradigm shift as stated in the opening paragraph of this article. The reader should also see secondary sources such as Ulukutuk 2022; Rodriguez-Sickert, et al (2015) for summaries of the concept.



no longer serves a purpose and that this is preceded by a “series of events” that precipitate a change.

My aim in this article is to motivate for the retention of the option for the poor paradigm in response to Temgo’s proposal for its replacement with compassion for the vulnerable. The article, utilising insights from different theological fields, argues that the two principles are Bible-based with different functions in the Bible. For that reason, they should not be conflated. The option for the poor is a specific intervention on behalf of the poor which requires a *kenotic* action while compassion for the vulnerable is a general response which connotes a broad *pastoral* approach. The discussion of this principle takes place within the epistemological framework of the Medellin meeting as opposed to the papal *magisterium* approach of Pope Francis (cf. Schlab, 2019).² It is my opinion that whether the Latin American theologians³ use the “option for the poor” or the official “preferential option for the poor” formulation, they are still propelled by the spirit of the Medellin meeting. I also refer to Luke’s gospel in support of my argument on the two principles.

The article is divided into four parts. I begin by invoking the spirit of the Latin American Episcopal Council (CELAM) meeting in Medellin (1968) and comparing it with the Puebla (1979) meeting; this is followed by a brief appraisal of interpretations of the option for the poor by liberation theologians since the Medellin meeting; an outline of poor and vulnerable in Luke’s Gospel follows, then a caution against a paradigm shift. First, an outline of the problem.

An outline of the problem: Temgo’s Proposal

Michel Temgo (2018) concludes his doctoral thesis, now being disseminated in a book form,⁴ with a proposal for a replacement of the “preferential option for the poor” principle (1979) of the Roman Catholic Church with a new principle, “compassion for the vulnerable”. According to him, this is based on his analyses of Jon Sobrino’s and Pope Francis’ respective ways of understanding and implementing the “option for the poor” principle (Temgo, 2018: 293-296).

Having looked at a number of publications by Sobrino, starting with his Christology and the poor through his understanding of the option for the poor (ibid., 60-143), Temgo proceeds to discuss Pope Francis’ theological and social thought (ibid., 144-194) before comparing the application of the option/preferential option for the poor and the theologies of Sobrino and Pope Francis (ibid., 240-292).⁵ He observes that they have a common understanding of the concept save that Sobrino approaches the notion of poor from the perspective of liberation theology, while Pope Francis has a spiritual perspective of the same. For example, writes Temgo, that when they talk of the poor, Sobrino alludes to the materially poor and Pope Francis, to the spiritually poor (ibid.). Temgo is of the view that consequent to this, the latter has a broader definition of the poor, incorporating the vulnerable whom he understands to be those ‘exposed to the possibility of being hurt or weakened’ (ditto, 2018:19). He also sees the ‘theme’ of mercy as a common factor in their theologies as well. Temgo seems to disregard the specific origin of Sobrino’s views on the topic of “mercy”, which is the genocide of his

² It is fair to argue, looking at his pronouncements, that Pope Francis’ current theological position on the poor is not where it was when he first became a pope in 2013. This is understandable (not necessarily plausible), he heads an institution with both poor and rich.

³ South African liberation theology took its cue from Latin American theologians, including the option from the poor framework.

⁴ *Jon Sobrino and Pope Francis: A New Springtime for the Preferential Option for the Poor/ Vulnerable* (2018).

⁵ There are some debatable points on Temgo’s views in this regard. However, this article is not a critique of the entire thesis but a caution against the abandonment of the cause of the poor which could take theology back to pre-Vatican II days.



colleagues and parishioners during the days of repression by the military (cf. Sobrino, 1995). However, it is not a theme that runs through his theology.

The two arguments Temgo proffers in motivation for his proposal are: i) that the option for the poor notion was born in a specific context of Latin America which, at the time, was marked by regimes of oppression and material poverty (Temgo, 2018:284). According to him, the term was controversial from the outset and remains debatable within the Roman Catholic Church to this day. On the other hand, George Bergoglio (now Pope Francis) espouses vulnerability in relation to the market and consumerist society (ibid.). Temgo seems to think that this is more accommodating and acceptable ii) that it is difficult to define terms such as “option”, “preferential” and “poor” today because focus is on other areas such as identities and historical conditions of Amerindians and African- descendants, LGBTQI group, etc. He asserts that this is where liberation theology is today. In a clear gravitation towards a paradigm shift, he postulates: “these new ‘paradigms’ not only oblige liberation theologians to include these new questions in their theology but also theologians in general. Consequently, it makes obsolete the expression ‘option for the poor’...” (ibid., 284-285). Here again, the line between contextual theology in general and the liberation trajectory is not clear. Liberation theology which emerged from Medellin focused on socio-economic and political injustices. The other causes which can be addressed through a contextual approach are accommodated under the rubric of vulnerability.

The major problem with this proposal however, is its disregard for a theological principle that has undergirded progressive theology for over five decades if the ten years since the Medellin meeting are factored in. Just two years before Temgo completed his doctoral studies, a Vietnamese, Thang Nguyen (2016) completed a dissertation for a Licentiate in Sacred Theology degree in which he reflects on the spiritual relevance of Sobrino’s option for the poor theology to Redemptorist’s charism and mission in Vietnam. Nguyen is affirming of the option for the poor and he sees it as central to the church’s mission in Vietnam. In South Africa, another theologian, Olehile Buffel (2015), pleads for a revival of the option for the poor principle which he thinks, is urgently needed in the context. Prior to that, in 2013, Gerald West, another South African, affirmed the option for the poor framework for reading the Bible with the poor and as late as 2017, Gerald Twomey reflects affirmingly on Pope John Paul II’s preferential option for the poor stance. This is just a small sample of theologians inside as well as outside the Roman Catholic Church circles who value the importance of the option for the poor. Their writings were still current when Temgo conducted his research and made his proposal. He was possibly limited by his operation within the “official” framework of the option for the poor as reflected in papal *magisteriums* on the one hand, on the other, he might just have attempted to create space to accommodate Pope Francis’ trajectory which he clearly values. There is space for that in the broad mission of the church. God’s focus on the poor is a definite project.

I will argue below that the two principles in question are both accommodated in the Bible and that they are necessary. Tempering with a paradigm on the grounds advanced by Temgo is not sufficient justification for a paradigm shift, particularly in the absence of evidence for lack of usefulness or a chain of events suggesting that. I begin by looking at the option for the poor paradigm against the Medellin and Puebla backgrounds.

“Option for the Poor” according to Medellin and Puebla

The option for the poor framework for liberation theology has a double origin- at Medellin (1968) and Puebla (1979). It started off as a resolution of CELAM at Medellin but was modified



with the inclusion of “preferential” at Puebla.⁶ Although the Puebla version is part of the official pastoral plan of the Roman Catholic Church, there is a view that it is not the same as the Medellin resolution (cf. Hyer, 1979) and most Latin American liberation theologians seem to still be under the influence of the Medellin spirit. It appears from documentation arising out of the two conferences- about eleven years apart, that the 1979 meeting intentionally toned down the spirit of Medellin which by then, had resulted in a proliferation of radical liberation theology publications (e.g. Gutierrez, 1971 trans. 1973; Segundo, 1976 trans. 1978; Boff, 1978). There could have been no motive other than an appeasement and/or accommodation of the wealthy and powerful within the same body where the poor were crying for justice. It is possible that Medellin theologians were motivated by a parochial experience and view of the situation as opposed to a global picture of the church. Was Puebla then an attempt to correct Medellin? The reader may decide the answer after reading the discussion that follows below in this section. Given the limited space, I focus on Gustavo Gutierrez’s and Jon Sobrino’s theological reflections as two leading Catholic theologians in this regard, straddling both post-Medellin and post-Puebla liberation theology periods.

i) Medellin and Puebla conferences

Much has been written about the above two meetings of the Latin American bishops who had responded to Vatican II’s call for a different way of doing theology.⁷ Latin American bishops placed the plight of the poor high on the agenda, an initiative which later turned out to have laid a foundation for what became known as liberation theology.⁸ Of it, Marjorie Hyer (1979) of the *Washington Post*,⁹ writes: “The conclusions of that meeting paved the way for a new ‘theology of liberation’ that allied the church with the poor and the oppressed which in Latin America often meant totalitarian governments”. It is not clear why it took eleven years for the “option for the poor” principle to be adopted and whether the difference between “option for the poor” and subsequent “preferential option for the poor” was a fundamental factor. The information from- and about- the respective conferences though hints at the motive. The close to 250 bishops who met at the Medellin Seminary in 1968, seized with the plight of their poor flocks in most regions of Latin America, spent a better part of the conference analysing the social context and did so in three different commissions (cf. Luciani, 2018). Persuaded by the dehumanising experience of the poor and undergirded by the witness of the scriptures about God’s intervention in defence of the poor (cf. Gutierrez, 1973), the conference adopted the formulation, “option for the poor”. By that it meant a commitment to and solidarity with the poor (ibid.), thus, imitating the ministry of Jesus Christ. The outcome of this conference was used to challenge the RCC to “take a stand against the injustices experienced by the poor of Latin America” (Gutierrez, 1973; Birmingham Diocesan Report, n.d.).

⁶ One of the versions of the Puebla report is contained in the document with the title: “On the 25th anniversary of the Puebla Conference” by Cardinal Alfonso Lopez Trujillo. [https://www.vatican.va.documents](https://www.vatican.va/documents) in the Pontifical Council for the Family. It gives a very official view. According to it, the desire to have a follow up to Medellin was expressed immediately after Medellin already, in 1969.

⁷ The theme of the conference was “the church in the present transformation of Latin America in the light of the Council”, the latter referring to Vatican Council II. *New Black Friars* 50 (582):72-78. (first published 1968. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.174-2005.1968.tb07710.x>).

⁸ I am referring here to a particular brand of contextual theology. There were before then in the wider church, Black Theology from the Union Theological Seminary where Jose Miguez Bonino, among others, was trained, and African Theology in Africa, following the 1966 Ibadan Conference. Black Theology had been imported in South Africa by the time Puebla took place and proponents such as Desmond Tutu were publishing on it.

⁹ I draw much from Hyer’s report because it is a first-hand witness account which provides raw, non-sanitised material.



The Puebla conference which took place more than a decade later, could not ignore the reality of poverty and suffering even if it had such intentions. It had to reflect on it theologically as had done the Medellin conference. However, it did so under different conditions. First, unlike the Medellin meeting where Pope Paul VI was the instigator for “out- of- the box” ways of doing theology, Puebla was opened by Pope John Paul II who at the outset, attempted to steer the priests away from what he termed ‘politics’ (Hyer, 1979). Secondly, representatives who incidentally had to be approved by the Vatican, were dominated by conservatives. Thirdly, the outspoken Brazilian group was conspicuously thinned out. Hyer (ibid.) notes that leading theologians such as Gutierrez¹⁰ were not present. It is not clear why he in particular, given the work he did after Medellin, was not on the list of attendees at such a theologically important conference- whether censorship by the Vatican had anything to do with it or whether he was simply not chosen by the local bishops because of his balancing act between the “universal charity of God” and “God’s bias towards the poor and oppressed” which would have been a slight departure from the spirit of Medellin.¹¹ Whatever the case may be, Gutierrez’s influence reflects on the final version of the Puebla document which alludes to “preferential option for the poor”. In my view, the Puebla formulation does not make any demands on the wealthy but seeks to persuade them while Medellin’s was an uncompromising call to conversion in the manner Jesus did. The Puebla formulation then strikes a balance between universal charity and God’s occasional exclusive intervention, according to Sobrino’s (2011) explanation of God’s bias.

The Pope’s visit to Latin America, the remarks in his opening address to the effect that priests must leave politics and focus on the gospel and the exclusion of the outspoken Brazilian group from the committee to take resolutions further (Hyer, 1979) confirm that Puebla was meant to somehow “correct” Medellin. However, the reality reflected in the succinct analyses of Medellin (see Medellin document, 1968) and ongoing social injustice could not be ‘sidestepped’ (Pope Francis’ language) even by the longer¹² Puebla document. *The Birmingham Diocesan Justice and Peace report* suggests that the Puebla formulation was in opposition to the idea of an “exclusive option for the poor” (ditto). It is therefore no surprise that the first draft of the document that summed up the deliberations and resolutions of the conference was challenged by progressive theologians. Hyer (ibid.) reports that another liberation theologian, Sergio Torres, characterised the document as a “dismal document, full of fears”, during an interview before proceeding to say, “the reality is that it betrays Medellin” (ibid.). It appears that the formulation “preferential option” was born through the interstices of this situation after some revisions of the initial drafts. Despite the document being revised to the final version with which the RCC is working, critics still felt that it did not “pick up the spirit of Medellin” (Hyer, ibid.).

As it will become clear in the discussion that focuses on the views of Gutierrez and Sobrino below, the spirit of Medellin was never discarded by progressive theologians even as they worked within the framework of the preferential option for the poor. Hence questions about Gutierrez’s dilemma and attempts at inclusivity. Three questions will guide the discussion: Did the challenge have the potential to be divisive? Was it too radical for the church at the time? Was it true to the biblical witness?

ii) Pertinent questions

¹⁰ Gutierrez was undoubtedly the most prominent of the theologians who took the Medellin resolution of the option for the poor further. He stands as a landmark between Medellin and Puebla.

¹¹ Reports on Medellin indicate that the analysis went to the roots and that delegates were non-compromising in their language.

¹² The Puebla document had over 30 resolutions while Medellin only had 16 (...).



For clarity, I attempt to respond to the three questions under the following numbered sub-headings.

a) A divisive Principle?

A hint at some concern about the potential divisiveness of the principle is clear in Gutierrez's theology, following Medellin (1971, trans. 1973). Gutierrez captures the spirit of Medellin well in respect of material poverty, the need for justice for the poor, a call to commitment and solidarity with the poor and God's uncompromising bias towards the poor (1973 cf. Temgo, 2018). He, however, drops a hint at the difficulty of reconciling preaching about God's "universal charity" and the proclamation of a God who "opts for a particular social class" (1973:107 cf. ditto, 129). Gutierrez portrays God as loving and wanting everyone to experience love (Dear, 2011). He asserts that God's love has two dimensions - the universal and the particular, without it being contradictory. There are times the God who loves all has to show a particular bias towards the poor and the oppressed. The church of course, has both poor and wealthy within its own ranks. Often, it is the wealthy, invariably in the minority, who are dominant. An abrasive language usually has a detrimental effect on the church's financial health. That is a universal dilemma, not a uniquely Latin American issue. The unity of the church could have been one consideration the Roman Catholic Church had for not immediately adopting the outcome of the Medellin Conference as its pastoral position. It might also be the reason for the current attempt to temper with the "option/preferential option for the poor". I will revert to this below.

Sobrinó, writing on the other side of Puebla¹³, is not apologetic about God's relationship with the poor and suffering. In other words, he sees no need to modify the biblical witness in this regard so as to accommodate the wealthy in the church who might even be exploiters of the poor. God is partial or biased towards the poor, that is his message. Thus he takes the argument beyond what he regards as Gutierrez's "dilemma", namely, wrestling with the notion of God's "universal charity" in relation to the "option for the poor" (Nguyen, 2018). He argues that the Gospel speaks *to* the poor and *of* the poor (Sobrinó, 2001). Citing Luke 4:18, he asserts that Jesus specifically offers salvation to the poor, the lame, the downtrodden, etc. It is good news *specifically* for these categories of people. Therefore, Jesus is expected to be found among the poor and exclusively with them. Though couched in the Puebla formulation, Groody (2013) expresses the same sentiments thus: "Preference means that God reaches out in love to those who have a greater need, to those who are most in pain, to those whose life is most threatened". In an introduction to a collection of essays, co-edited with Gutierrez (2014), they confirm the option for the poor as a 1960s notion.

All the synoptic gospels portray Jesus' earthly ministry as having taken place exclusively among the poor and marginalised people in Galilee. Those outside these categories who wished to be saved were required to join the poor and to also be like Jesus to them (Luke 19:1-8; 18:18-30). It sounds logical that given what the scriptures teach about God's intervention, Jesus cannot be on the side of both the oppressor and the oppressed, the exploiter and the exploited. This, in my view, reflects the spirit of Medellin. Lest there be a misunderstanding, Sobrinó was not in dialogue with or refuting Gutierrez, he was mainly advancing the struggle of the materially poor, as he understood the sentiments expressed at Medellin. There is nothing divisive about this. His arguments about God's partiality also apply to the point about the radical call to which I turn below.

¹³ This point is usually overlooked. Even Temgo does not highlight it. Yet, Sobrinó uses Puebla formulation with the Medellin spirit. Part of the reason of course, is the influence of liberation theology that has come out, e.g. Gutierrez's publications, reflecting Medellin spirit.



b) A radical call?

The call to opt for the poor was not an academic exercise (cf. O'Brien, 1992) but a radical one which will remain so for as long as there are human-made structures that cause haves and have not. Gutierrez (1973), elaborating on the pronouncement of the conference, argues that Christ is present among the poor and oppressed, especially in their struggle to end poverty and oppression. An option for the poor is therefore an option for Jesus Christ (ibid. cf. 2009). For Sobrino (2001:26), Christology is "not merely about Jesus Christ but also the entire body of Christ. God suffered on the cross on behalf of the body. Therefore, on the cross, it was the entire body that was crucified". What did this mean if Medellín repeatedly heard phrases like: "there are poor people because there are rich people and there are rich people because there are poor people"? (Gutierrez, 1973). Who was crucifying and who was standing by, watching or cheering the crucifier?

When we talk of the spirit of Medellín, we are referring to the spirit that raises such pertinent and radical questions. The social analysis at Medellín helped to distinguish between the poor and rich, oppressor and oppressed, exploiter and exploited. Gutierrez (1971:289) captures the spirit well with the words: "to be poor means to die of hunger, to be illiterate, to be exploited by others, not to know that you are being exploited, not to know that you are a person". This experience of the poor is the antithesis of the experiences of the wealthy. Some among those born "with a silver spoon in the mouth" might not have identified fully with those who caused the suffering of the poor and were sympathetic instead. However, the would-be members of the body of Christ are expected in the Medellín spirit, to rid themselves of the things that cause the suffering of the poor and stand on God's side to enable the crucified to come down from the cross (Buffell, 2015). This is a radical call, a painful one too, to anyone who finds security in the comfort of their wealth.

As later theologians explain, the option for the poor is a call to the wealthy to be in genuine solidarity with the poor (see Nolan, 1987; Boff & Pixley, 2011), that is, in terms of their lifestyle, attitude towards the poor and willingness to share their possessions with the poor. Gutierrez postulates that voluntary poverty is a response to this situation, that is, a 'choice to live with the materially poor and a protest against injustice towards them' (Dear, 2011). In their book, Clodovis Boff and George Pixley (2011) emphasize that the call is for the rich to come to the level of the poor, not the other way round: "The option for the poor means putting ourselves on the side of the poor, in solidarity with them, in their cause and their struggle, not to make them our allies, but to make ourselves their allies". In other words, they are called to "make themselves poor with the poor" (O'Brien, 1992). Nothing could be more radical in a context that was dominated by a rich minority who were protected by ruthless armies.¹⁴

I now turn to the theological justification of the option for the poor as a biblical principle.

c) Biblical foundation?

The option for the poor principle is firmly grounded in the scripture. Various authors trace the witness of scripture to God's intervention from the beginning of the history of salvation in the Old Testament (cf. Dorr, 1994; West, 2007), to the ministry of Jesus (see Nolan, 1996; Sobrino, 2008). Indeed, God's relationship with the former Egyptian slaves is defined by God's defence of the poor and oppressed against the powerful, disobedient and infidel elite (cf. Amos, Jeremiah, Micah). Jesus continues acting in defence of the poor, oppressed and marginalised; and he calls others to solidarity with them. For this reason, Sobrino (2008)

¹⁴ We need not look further than the Rich Young Ruler for a typical reaction. Yet the church is expected to carry out its mandate of challenging, regardless.



concludes that God cannot be understood apart from his “*partial* (my emphasis) compassion and concern for the poor”. This puts the poor at the centre of biblical witness. No theologian-conservative or liberal, can deny this. However, some try to find less challenging interpretations of potent texts. For example, the challenge of Jesus to the Rich Young Ruler is explained away as Jesus’ response to the specific ‘spiritual need of the Rich Young Ruler’.

That interpretation may well be so but in the context of the option for the poor discourse, it explains the challenge away. A South African theologian, Albert Nolan (1986), asserts that the phrase has nothing to do with the individual’s handling of material possessions but with their stance in relation to structural violence against the poor. Based on this, he interprets the call to Christians as a call for “a choice to be on the side of the oppressed”. This is not the same as a call for them to detach themselves from material possessions, the core of Jesus’ challenge to the Rich Young Ruler. Any form of tempering with this potent text creates room for the challenged to sidestep. I have already referred to Jesus’ “Manifesto” in Luke 4:18-19 for the targets of his ministry and to Luke 1: 46-55 for the prediction of what Jesus would do to the elite. These may be among the “things that make for peace” in Jerusalem to which Luke refers towards the end of his narrative about Jesus’ earthly ministry (Luke 19:41-42).

The scriptural witness is clear. It is the interpretations of the scriptural tradition that have sought ways of avoiding a run-in with the rich elite. Liberation theologians, as a consequence of their understanding of God’s option, have introduced the option for the poor paradigm. In my view, this is a specific project within a broad theme. Below, I turn to the broad theme of poor and vulnerable as portrayed in Luke’s Gospel. The details will shed better light on the relationship between “poor” and “vulnerable”.

The Poor and Vulnerable in Luke’s Gospel

Thus far, I have discussed the respective principles of option and preference for the poor. Reference to God’s bias in respect of these was in general terms as portrayed in the scriptures. In this section, I specifically look at what Luke’s Gospel tells us about the poor and vulnerable. I distinguish one category from the other, arguing that vulnerable is a broad category while poor is a specific subset of vulnerable. This is clearer in Luke’s Gospel than in the other two synoptic gospels. The term “vulnerable” is not used by Luke in this regard and it is also absent in the language of both Medellin and Puebla conferences.

Luke starts off the gospel with the Magnificat (Luke 1:46-55). In this context it spells out the envisaged mission of the expected saviour. It does not mention the poor specifically but broadly talks of turning the social pyramid upside down (Luke 1:51-53). The lowly are all the groups at the bottom (the poor, sick, blind, lame, outcast, etc.) and they will, as a result of the saviour’s mission, be at the top and the “proud” or arrogant elite, at the bottom. These, in terms of the above definition, fall under the specific category of “vulnerable”. As the ministry of Jesus unfolds, specifics in respect of poor and vulnerable become clearer. I reflect on these briefly below.

First, the vulnerable in Luke: As indicated above, we have inferred, based on the definition of vulnerable, that all the lowly are vulnerable. These include the sick (Luke 4:31-37; 4:38-44; 5:12-16; 5:17-26; 7:10-10; 7:11-19; 18:35-43), the physically challenged (Luke 5:17-26; 18:35-43; 7:22), the imprisoned (Luke 4:18; 3:19-21), the who were demon-possessed (Luke 8:26-39; 4:31-41; 6:17-19; 7:21; 9:1-2), the leper (Luke 5:12-16; 7:22), the marginalised on the basis of their gender (Luke 7:36-50; 8:40-55; 13:10-17), the “sinners” (Luke 5:27-32; 7:36-50; 15:11-32) and finally, the gentiles (Luke 10:13-16; 23:47) in the context of Judaisers. They were in one form or another, made to feel that they were “outsiders” and trampled upon. Acts of



healing, touching the untouchables, forgiveness of sins¹⁵ and feasting with those the society had defined outside its boundaries were Jesus' ways of bringing these in, that is, giving them a sense of belonging. It is to these "little ones" that the Kin[g]dom of God belonged (cf. Nolan, 1976). Jesus came primarily to save them .

Two things which scholars seem to miss or overlook about this category of people are: first, that they are not necessarily the poor but the poor may be among them. Sick people for example, may have been marginalised because they were thought to be impure (e.g. Luke 13:11-13; 5:15), not because of poverty. The issue about the woman with a flow of blood for example, was not her poverty but her impurity (Luke 8:43-48). Consequently, no one was allowed in terms of Jewish religious laws, to touch her but Jesus is said to have freely interacted with her. Before then Jesus raises Jairus' daughter from death (Luke 8:40-43). This raises the ire of the temple leaders because by so doing, Jesus is disregarding the laws of purity (cf. Neusner, 1975). Sobrino (2008:111) reminds us that the God of Jesus is a "God whose steps are firm, self-lowering and, embracing".

The second thing is the varying conditions of the sick. Sickness is largely caused by natural factors. However, reception by society usually leads to their marginalisation as seen in the case of the woman with a flow of blood. There is no justification for the marginalisation of any person on the basis of a physical challenge or them going through natural physiological cycles or suffering from leprosy, mental illness, etc. Luke's Jesus makes this point in stretching the seams of the Jewish laws, thus turning the tables against the elite as envisaged in the Magnificat.

Secondly, a special focus on the poor. The poor are at the top of Jesus' list of beneficiaries, according to Luke 4:18. As in Isaiah 61, Jesus is said to have claimed that he has been sent to "give good news to the poor". All the other categories which are also God's concern come after this. As pointed out by various scholars these are not spiritually poor but materially poor people. They are street beggars, the hungry (Luke 1:53; 3:11; 6:2; 19:10-17), the unemployed and those who pick crumbs under the table (16:19-31). Jesus' concern and solidarity with the poor, is both hermeneutical and practical. It is not emotional. He lived and moved among them, teaching, healing and feeding them. By virtue of their social status, they are vulnerable. Hence God treats them as a special project.

I have argued in a different context (Speckman, 2007) that the restoration of a physically challenged person was a transformation from the state of dependency on others to economic self-sufficiency. Some of the people who sought a restoration of their body limbs claimed to be unable to support themselves or their families because of their physical challenges (ibid.). This pattern is also clear in Jesus' interaction with the poor. He not only sympathises with them and transforms their bodies, he also defends them against exploitation. This is seen, for example, in his intervention in the temple exploitation (Luke 19:45-48). Interestingly, all three synoptic gospels either use "den of robbers or thieves" while John has "marketplace" (John 2: 13-16). John may have been referring to a different occasion.

Thirdly, juxtaposing of poor and rich: While the poor were the direct beneficiaries of Jesus' ministry, the rich were not precluded. Their inclusion was however, conditional on them bringing the poor to a decent level of living. Two ways of doing this were either by sharing their possessions so the poor could be at a better social level or totally giving up their opulent

¹⁵ His "forgiving" of sins may be interpreted as counselling because the feeling of being forgiven reassures and makes one "whole".



lifestyles and the wealth that maintained it, for the benefit of the poor. The narrative of the Rich Young Ruler which contains this message is known to be a difficult one to understand (Nolan, 1986; Buffel, 2015; Temgo, 2018). Its import becomes clearer when looked at from the perspective of Acts 2: 42-47 and 4:32-34 which are set in a collective context. No one is forced to give up anything but in solidarity with the poor, they share to raise each one's social level to a decent one, with food and shelter.

Back to the Rich Young Ruler, it should be noted that he approaches Jesus voluntarily because beyond the riches he has, there is a spiritual need (Potapov, 2014) his wealth could never satisfy. However, he is pained by the requirement to detach himself from that which turns out to be a stumbling block to his salvation (Luke 18:23). Jesus' advice to him is in line with his preaching about the difficulty the rich would have entering the kin[g]dom of heaven than would a camel to go through the eye of a needle (Luke 18:24-25). The verbal response and physical reaction of the Rich Young Ruler confirm Jesus' words. Jesus does not compromise or alter the requirement in order to accommodate him (cf. Park, 2014). The message is thus clear- God is uncompromisingly on the side of the poor and God takes on those on the opposite side.

Given all the theological and biblical points thus far made, the question is whether God's project in respect of the poor has reached its end-date, in other words, whether it is time for a paradigm shift. Perhaps, broader than a project, it should be viewed as a programme which unfolds in various ways in different contexts. A programme is ongoing while a project has a start and end-date (see Simplilearn, 2023).

Is it time for a Paradigm shift?

The heading of this section speaks directly to Temgo's proposal by raising the question whether it is now time to change the paradigm. We have discussed the origins of the phrase "option for the poor", the theological framework emanating from it and biblical witness to God's relationship with the poor which carries on through Jesus. Theological activism in Latin America and in other depraved situations, for example, South Africa, in the last five decades were inspired by this phrase. We must now ask whether this all points to a "sell- by" date of the principle which has become a paradigm for liberation theology? How is that measured? As alluded above, a paradigm shift can only be justified by the following (I am paraphrasing):

- i) Loss of effectiveness

Has the option for the poor lost its effectiveness? The above list, arising from the discussion is evidence that the option for the poor principle still has room in socio-theological reflections today. To this we may add voices such as those mentioned under the problem outline. These are not only looking back with approval, but are also calling for a revival of the preferential option for the poor principle where it is dormant. Judgement in this regard cannot be clouded by considerations of individuals who may have been motivated by their refusal to detach themselves from the things that held them back (e.g. the Rich Young Ruler Luke 18:18-23) or those who had rejected the message of Jesus outright (e.g. the Pharisees Luke 16:14). The gospel message cannot be adjusted to suit such people. This is the challenge of the option for the poor. Choosing the side of the poor means that the elite must work against themselves. It is thus "suicidal", in Amilcar Cabral's language (1969). Yet, it is not all who are willing to go all the way.

Anecdotal evidence from the empirical situation shows that most have since "sloganized" the "preferential option for the poor" notion by shouting "solidarity with the poor" from the comfort of their security and opulence. However, they continue to live life as they wish, away from the discomfort of situations that demand a total commitment. In Nolan's (1986) understanding,



this category of people is supposed to serve as catalysts and fellow travellers, not as ones who run on behalf of the poor. Now that they have either graduated to, or receded back to the middle-class enclaves, the poor are left languishing. This is not a sign of a loss of effectiveness but a reflection of the need for the poor to organise themselves and/or strengthen their leadership.

ii) Events preceding the total collapse

Has there been any sign that the option for the poor principle is waning, being overtaken by other theological principles? When this is viewed from a papal perspective, as expressed in the *magisteriums*, for example, it appears that the tide is moving away from the option for the poor. This is because Pope Francis has reshaped the Puebla version of the principle. He looks at various matters, including environmental degradation (cf. *Laudato si*, 2015). Based on what they perceive to be their national priority, Australian Catholic bishops have shifted their focus to environmental issues. This is not a paradigm shift but a different project which does not, for example, address the plight of the aboriginals and the levels of poverty in Australia.¹⁶ The Pope's broadening of his pastoral approach and theology are not an indication of a paradigm shift but a reflection of him recognising that he has a responsibility for the entire church, and all the theological streams that reflect human concerns in different contexts.

As declared above, this article follows the liberation theology approach. From that perspective, some of the permutations of the option for the poor may be viewed as sidestepping rather than changing the paradigm. Temgo (2018) himself acknowledges Pope Francis' discomfort with criticising the economy of "exclusion". His tacit move away from the position he announced about the poor when assuming office in 2013 is therefore not surprising. The situation that has led to the adoption of the phrase in Medellin, which could not be fully discarded in Puebla, is still prevalent today. It is prevalent in Latin America, with improvements in some regions of it, while in most parts of the South, very little has changed to date. Adding other frills to the option for the poor principle does not address the problem but attempts to smooth its rough edges. They are a 'thorn in the side' of the wealthy who dominate the church. The well-motivated calls for the strengthening or revival of the option for the poor go in the opposite direction to a collapse of the paradigm. There are no equally strong or well-motivated statements pointing to a collapse. Even Temgo's proposal is not based on strong grounds.

There were individuals in the 1980s who made sacrifices for the sake of the poor. In some cases, there was a total "*kenosis*" (at least, in the public eye) and in others, a "trickle-down", that is, a sharing of their possessions in a piecemeal manner. However, Jesus observed that the poor "will always be with you" (Matthew 26:11, John 12:8). This, which in my view, was not intended in a disparaging manner but as advice to plan life along the lowest common denominator (LCD) lines as opposed to viewing the poor as a temporary responsibility for a specified period. Being on the side of the poor is a demanding and lifetime commitment, not a piecemeal, momentary gesture.¹⁷ It has no start and end-date for as long as the kin[g]dom has not been fully established.

iii) Have the conditions that made for the option for the poor been removed?

¹⁶ A report released on 22 March 2023 by Australian Council of Social Services (ACOSS) paints a dim picture of the situation, highlighting the condition of certain social categories.

¹⁷ This is not an easy one, even by today's standards. It would certainly make no sense to argue that the followers of Jesus today are expected to work towards being poor. The alternative would be that they are expected to share equitably with the less fortunate with the view to bringing them to a humane, liveable standard. This is where the "parting of ways" comes in- the wealthy usually do not want to part with anything, not even what they need to give up in exchange for their salvation.



Statistics in various parts of the world indicate that poverty is still a huge challenge. There is a slight improvement in some parts of Latin America, compared to the situation that was obtained at the time of the two conferences alluded to above. The United Nations statistics (ECLAC 2022) show that 32% (205 million) of the population in Latin American countries is still poor, 13.1% of that, extremely poor. A study over a 26-year period (1970-1995) by Londono and Szekely (1997) shows that poverty and inequality over the period in question had not improved much despite the changes in governments. In South Africa, where the principle had also been appropriated because it addressed a similar situation, World Bank rates released on 30 March 2023 indicate that 63% of the population lived in poverty as of end November 2022. This is higher than the average of 58% it had been reduced to ten years ago. These are just two examples in two different continents with many poor countries.

The political landscape is indeed changing but the conditions of poor people have much room for improvement. It is best to talk of 'work in progress' in this case despite the poor being impatient and often protesting. If they should stop expressing impatience, the situation may just stagnate instead of improving as required. Those who in the past, have spoken on their behalf have become fewer. This is not an indication of work accomplished or, of the uselessness of the paradigm, it is a manifestation of the extent of the success of co-optation and assimilation. Twomey (2005) reminds us that the option for the poor "implies a constant effort to change the inequitable economic, social and political structures for a more just and fairer world". Until that has been achieved, the paradigm remains relevant and necessary. The causes of vulnerable minorities and Temgo's inability to deal with liberation theology terminology cannot constitute plausible reasons for a paradigm shift.

Conclusion

The above discussion has helped to an extent to demarcate the lines between poor and vulnerable as theological principles, shed light on the meaning of "option for the poor" in both radical and moderate senses, as well as made a case for not shifting the paradigm. It is my considered view that the time for a paradigm shift is not yet and that it is neither desirable to either shift any of the two principles or to conflate them. One section of the body of Christ needs solidarity because of their poverty while many others, the poor and down-trodden included, need greater attention because of their obvious vulnerability.

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