

# AN OPTION FOR WOMEN?

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THE QUESTION OF AN 'OPTION FOR WOMEN' has arisen in the context of post-Medellin awareness that an 'option for the poor' must take account of the fact that most of the world's poor are women. In this article we will briefly trace the development of the 'option for the poor' in ecclesiastical documents, show how this option has become linked with a growing feminist consciousness, particularly among Ignatian religious, and explore some of the implications of these developments for those giving retreats and spiritual direction.

## *The option for the poor*

Prior to the Second Vatican Council, the apostolic efforts of the Roman Catholic Church, its clergy and its lay organized groups were primarily directed toward the evangelization of the 'dechristianized' working class, especially in industrializing Europe. With industrialization, however, came the separation of the workplace from the home, the devaluation of women's work in the home as economically unproductive, and the segregation of women in the work-force into the lower-paying jobs considered to be 'women's work'. It was unusual at this time for a bishop to give apostolic priority to the specific problems of women in the work-force (low wages, long hours, sexual harassment, family and child-care responsibilities outside working hours).

The experiences of the religious activists of the period, lay and clerical, brought a gradual recognition of the need for a reordering of socio-economic priorities and political institutions to achieve a more equitable distribution of material goods and a greater protection for the rights of the powerless. Such efforts led to increased theological and pastoral reflection upon the situation of the working class, and ultimately found expression in the social encyclicals of the period, *Rerum novarum* of Leo XIII (1891) and *Quadragesimo anno* of Pius XI (1931).<sup>1</sup>

These developments in Catholic social teaching were, however, linked to an ecclesiology which emphasized the separation of the

Church from 'the world', the subordination of temporal values to spiritual, the separation of those committed to the betterment of 'the world' (the laity) from those committed to the fostering of spiritual values (the hierarchy, religious and clergy).<sup>2</sup> For the religious activist, such a perspective created a false dichotomy between spiritual and temporal goods and implicitly devalued the temporal. Within such a framework, there was little incentive for giving priority to the issues affecting the material welfare of women, such as achieving parity of wages with men. In the context of the times, the emphasis was rather upon preserving the family unit and securing a living wage for the male head of household, so that the wife could remain at home. A feminist consciousness about 'women's work' did not yet exist.

With Pope John XXIII came a different emphasis, what could be termed a 'new spirituality'. In his two great encyclicals, *Mater et magistra* (1961) and *Pacem in terris* (1963), he spoke positively of the value of human work and of the interior unity between religious faith and commitment to the betterment of 'the world'. And he planted the seeds for some of the theological developments and pastoral emphases which found expression in the documents of Vatican II and which led to Medellín: a generally optimistic stance toward developments in the modern world, a positive valuation of political democracy, the recognition of the role of the Church in promoting international peace and justice.<sup>3</sup>

These developments did not yet constitute an 'option for the poor', but the effect of John's teaching was to give legitimation to the 'progressive' elements in the Church of the time. Consciously or unconsciously, he employed a language which spoke to the experience of many religious activists, including religious influenced by the Ignatian tradition. These, as 'contemplatives in action', were accustomed to discovering the interior connection between prayer and apostolic activity, to 'finding God in all things', including developments in the modern world.

The documents of Vatican II, specifically *Gaudium et spes* (1965), continued and refined the developments in Church teaching suggested by John XXIII. There are some significant advances, partly due to the presence of bishops from Third World countries, partly due to the quiet influence of a group of theologians and bishops called 'The Church of the Poor' who met during the Council, and partly due to the experience of bishops and theologians with lay and clerical groups working on behalf of the poor in their dioceses.

According to *Gaudium et spes*, Christians 'are obliged to come to the relief of the poor, and to do so not merely out of their superfluous goods'. This statement corrects the teaching of Leo XIII and Pius XI which had been interpreted to mean that Christians had an obligation to give *only* of one's superfluous goods.<sup>4</sup> The question of world peace is firmly linked to the question of economic justice in *Gaudium et spes*.<sup>5</sup> And there is an urgent emphasis on the necessity of sharing goods: 'God destined the earth and all it contains for the use of all men (sic) and all peoples . . . Furthermore, the right to have a share of earthly goods sufficient for oneself and one's family belongs to everyone.'<sup>6</sup> The emphasis is on international co-operation to deal with the problems of hunger and need in poor countries.

Such developments in the teaching of the Church with respect to its obligation to the poor at the Second Vatican Council provided both the historical context and the theological legitimation for the selection of an 'option for the poor' at the Second General Conference of Latin American Bishops at Medellin in 1967.<sup>7</sup> In their Conclusions, the bishops emphasized the structural roots of injustice in the distribution of property and power in Latin America. They asserted that they 'cannot remain indifferent in the face of the tremendous social injustices existent in Latin America, which keep our people in dismal poverty'(14.1). Turning to Christian teaching on evangelical poverty, they distinguished between poverty as a lack of the material goods necessary for a truly human life, which is an evil; spiritual poverty, which is an attitude of opening up to God; and poverty as a commitment by which one voluntarily and lovingly places oneself in solidarity with the materially poor, both in order to bear witness to the evil which such poverty represents and to identify with Christ's own spiritual liberty regarding material goods (14.4). Given these distinctions, they decided that Christ's 'distinct commandment to "evangelize the poor"' should bring them to 'a distribution of resources and apostolic personnel that effectively gives preference to the poorest and most needy sectors and to those segregated for any cause whatsoever' (14.9).

The Latin American bishops' identification of the socio-economic factors which kept the poor in a state of extreme deprivation, along with their reference to Christian teaching and their assumption of an apostolic stance which gave priority to the needs of the poor in the allocation of Church resources constituted the heart of what has come to be known as the 'option for the poor'.

The international impact of Medellin, following as it did upon the publication of the documents of Vatican II, can be seen in the context

of the discussions surrounding the encyclicals of Pope Paul VI, *Populorum progressio* (1967) and *Octogesima adveniens* (1971). These documents, which addressed the problems of the poor in developing countries, including those in Latin America, witnessed to the debates going on within the international Church on the evangelical responsibilities of Christians with regard to the poor. In the context of these discussions, the document of the Synod of Bishops of 1970, *Justice in the world*, is perhaps best known for its succinct, but controversial statement addressing this question:

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, or, in other words, of the Church's mission for the redemption of the human race and its liberation from every oppressive situation.<sup>8</sup>

In this amazingly brief but powerful statement, the bishops disregarded the grounds for previous distinctions between action ordered to the betterment of 'the world' and action ordered exclusively for 'higher spiritual ends'. For apostolic religious in particular, this statement confirmed their belief that action on behalf of justice for the poor was evangelical activity, appropriate for 'contemplatives in action'.

Given, however, that the development of an 'option for the poor' has had an impact upon the apostolic orientations of many, including religious communities of men and women, how has an 'option for women' come to be linked with it?

#### *An option for women?*

As women have moved in increasing numbers into the work-force in industrialized countries, they have likewise become aware of the difficulties attendant upon entering what was formerly a male-dominated world. Women in the work-force, both in Church and in society, have experienced gender-based discrimination in hiring, a lack of parity with male workers in the allocation of salaries and benefits, sexual harassment on the job, work-place policies which are blind to the exigencies of pregnancy and child-care, and the existence of the 'glass ceiling' which prevents otherwise qualified women from occupying upper-level positions in business, politics, the professions and the Church.<sup>9</sup> These experiences have contributed to a growing 'feminist consciousness' which sees the link between the economic and cultural devaluing of women and women's work and the

situation of poverty and oppression experienced by women worldwide. The poor of the world are in fact predominantly women and the children for whom they are the primary care-takers.

Given this reality of the situation of women, has the moment come to make a specific 'option for women'? It would seem so. In fact, this step has already been taken by a number of Ignatian and non-Ignatian religious. The Decrees of the 32nd General Congregation of the Jesuits (1965), for example, state that the 'mission of the Society of Jesus today is the service of faith, for which the promotion of justice is an absolute requirement'.<sup>10</sup> The Decrees of the 33rd General Congregation (1983) are more specific as to what this means. They note that the validity of their mission will depend to a large extent on their solidarity with the poor: 'So, together with many other religious congregations, we wish to make our own the Church's preferential option for the poor'.<sup>11</sup> In specifying new needs and situations which must be addressed, they include 'the unjust treatment and exploitation of women'.<sup>12</sup>

This is a significant step for an international religious congregation of men, particularly given the mutual influence of Jesuits and religious women in the context of retreats and spiritual direction. This mutual influence and growing 'feminist consciousness' can be seen in some of the recent documents of religious women, particularly those with experience in an international context.

Reflecting upon this evolution, it seems to us that an understanding of the option for the poor explicitly as an option for women emerges out of women's experience and reflection on that experience. This process of reflection is the logical application of social analysis as it is personally appropriated by women and for women. It is an axiom of feminist theory that 'women' are rendered invisible within patriarchal systems, social structures and thought. Thus, when one talks about 'the poor' abstractly, one fails to notice that three-quarters of the poor are women and their children and that their poverty is experienced in specifically gendered ways. Within women's congregations in which members espoused the work of justice as inherently linked to their charisms, this specification of an option for the poor as an option for women became inescapable. Most women's congregations were profoundly affected in the seventies and eighties by the justice work of Jesuits as they embraced the decrees of their General Congregations. Many communities also returned to their founding charisms with new insights as a result of the documents from Latin America, feminist analysis and the experience of their members in the Third World.

In their General Chapter of 1988, the Religious of the Sacred Heart, for example, specifically made an 'option for women' in the context of their 'option for the poor':

When we shared our experiences and reflection on the situation of women in our different cultures, the injustice experienced by one half of the human race struck us forcibly . . . wherever there is poverty, women suffer more and bear more of the consequences.

They observed that often women are oppressed or in an inferior position:

- in the family,
- at work (discrimination, salary),
- in the social, economic and juridical structures, where the law does not respect their rights,
- in the church, where their place is minimized.<sup>13</sup>

In the light of the situation of women in the diverse cultures where they served, they specified their own call:

- to work with other women so that together we may become aware of our dignity, our potential, and our responsibility;
- to promote the acceptance of the fundamental equality and complementarity of women and men;
- to assume our responsibility in the Church, aware that Jesus not only confirmed the dignity of women but also involved them in the building of the Kingdom.<sup>14</sup>

A similar evolution is taking place among the Ursulines of the Roman Union, another group with historically strong ties to the Jesuits. For example, in the Mission Statement of the United States Central Province Conference of August 1991, developed after a period of two years of Province-wide discussion, the Ursulines stated:

Convinced of our need for the conversion of heart inherent in gospel living, we, daughters of Angela, call ourselves to be gospel community through listening to and reflecting together on the gospel. We especially call ourselves and others to awareness, education and action for JUSTICE.

We unite together at this time in history to

- confront the oppression of women
- stand in solidarity with the poor.<sup>15</sup>

A third case in point is that of the Sisters of Mercy of the Americas. Its nineteenth-century Irish founder, Catherine McAuley, observed both the effects of poverty on women as well as their potential influence. As a result, she identified as characteristic of her congregation 'a most serious application to the Instruction of poor girls, Visitation of the Sick, and protection of distressed women of good character'.<sup>16</sup> As contemporary Sisters of Mercy renewed their charism, they linked mercy with work on behalf of justice and an option for the poor with a 'special concern for women'.

Recalling the word of Jesus that he is one with his suffering members, we respond to the cry of the poor . . .

Through direct service and through our influence we seek to relieve misery and address its causes, and to support all persons who struggle for full dignity.<sup>17</sup>

We carry out our mission of mercy guided by prayerful consideration of the needs of our time, Catherine McAuley's preferential love for the poor and her special concern for women . . .<sup>18</sup>

In 1986, there was still some reluctance boldly to link an option for the poor with an option for women. Textually, a 'special concern for women' is the first step in that direction. However, by 1991, the Chapter boldly stated the following in their Direction Statement:

Animated by the Gospel and Catherine McAuley's passion for the poor, we, the Sisters of Mercy of the Americas, are impelled to commit our lives and our resources for the next four years to act in solidarity with:

1. the economically poor of the world, especially women and children;
2. women seeking fullness of life and equality in church and society.

This shift in the official documents represents in fact an option for women.

#### *Implications for retreats and spiritual direction*

If such has been the journey of the Church, of Jesuits and of apostolic women religious, what might be some of the implications of an option for women for those giving retreats and spiritual direction?

In preparing this article, we consulted with several people who have been giving the Exercises to discover whether or not the

experience of making or giving the Exercises reflects something of the journey described above. The results were surprising to us. The most experienced directors felt there was certainly a connection, but for the most part an option for women exists more in potential than in practice. Perhaps those giving spiritual direction and the Exercises need to address far more fundamental issues for women than supporting them in their arriving at 'an option for women' as a call they might take in solidarity with Christ who chooses poverty rather than riches. What are some of these fundamental issues?

First of all, the significance of an option for women would need to be present in the consciousness of spiritual directors. They would need to be aware of the process of Christian feminist awakening, of the differences in the ways women and men experience themselves and construct their world, and in the way women may be either alienated by or positively oppressed by key metaphors in the Exercises and in the use of scriptural texts.<sup>19</sup> Conversely, directors would need to be able to use these texts in ways that enhance women's sense of self, agency and relationship with God.<sup>20</sup> Women have been so wounded by the use of religious texts which maintain their oppression and disempowerment that directors need to be alert to the ways women have internalized these interpretations in self-defeating and dehumanizing ways. As directees pray with a text from scripture or from the Exercises, they are never encountering it for the first time. The texts carry both negative and positive meanings through preaching, teaching and spiritual writings. Directors need to have already appropriated a critical hermeneutic of these texts so they can be presented in ways that can be constructively received. Since all of these texts were produced within patriarchal cultures, it is necessary to make the patriarchal layer explicit—that which is anti-woman. It is also necessary to suggest where the text itself shows God/Jesus not behaving as a patriarch and hence that women can experience something liberating, affirming and inviting of themselves. And finally it is important to invite the free play of imagination in the directee in terms of what a non-patriarchal or non-androcentric version of this story or image might be.<sup>21</sup>

Within the Exercises and in the retreat process, the role of imagination in prayer is extremely important. Directees place themselves in gospel scenes and allow these imagined scenes to be the sacred place of their encounter with Jesus. There are two things we want to suggest about imaginative contemplation. First, the woman's own imaginal process needs to be deeply honoured. It is her



experience, her engagement with the mystery. Women who have made the Exercises without undue disturbances frequently say: 'The director respected my process and did not ask me to be somewhere else or do something else'. If directors have effectively translated or reinterpreted the Exercises for women, women's own psyches and spirits will evolve the imagery they need in order to encounter the mystery contemplated in harmony with their feminine experience and psyches. Honouring a woman's internal process deeply affirms her and begins the healing of her alienation from herself. Second, the director needs to be alert to how these imaged scenes may unconsciously replicate an oppressive or patriarchal strand of the scripture scene contemplated. In this case, the director would gently raise questions or make suggestions that allow the woman to notice how she has internalized these messages. With such insight, she can let them go and be open to how her encounter with Jesus might elicit entirely new images.

In addition, several key meditations in the Exercises invite the retreatant to make a specific option. The Principle and Foundation presents an image of an ordered relationship to God, self and creation. The Two Standards sets up a choice between a way that leads to greater disorder and evil and a way that leads toward Christ. The Three Classes of Persons and Three Degrees of Humility foster indifference in the retreatant by encouraging the desire and choice of 'poverty with Christ poor, rather than riches; insults with Christ loaded with them, rather than honours, etc.'<sup>22</sup> Women, by virtue of their subordinate status in Church and society, enter into these contemplations already experiencing such poverty, insults and worthlessness. For them this has not been a choice but a condition of their existence. And it may also suggest why some women instinctively resist these structural meditations. They know too well what this might feel like. The images and themes of the Exercises suggest that the persons who undergo them may more often be men of privilege and social status rather than marginalized men or women.

If directors give these specific meditations to women, it is extremely important that they help them situate themselves correctly in their own social experience and to notice explicitly how Jesus places himself in the world and experience of the outsider, the marginalized, the despised.<sup>23</sup> This contextualization could happen in the spiritual conversations that precede the Exercises or it could be woven into the way these particular meditations are presented. It is not so much that women are first called to move further into an

unredeemed experience of outsiderhood in order to follow Christ, but rather are invited to discover that Christ is already overcoming this marginalization by his inclusion of women in discipleship, his intimacy with them, his protection of them and his empowerment of them. If women in the course of the Exercises experience Christ as already acting in their experience as women in a profound way, a more fundamental kind of healing and call unfolds. One feminist woman described it this way: 'I found myself on the outside of the crowd and invited to move into deeper intimacy and relationship with Jesus. It was different from my usual experiences in which one is fighting with the insiders to let you in. In this case, there was no one preventing me from moving closer except my own fears.'

There is then within the Exercises a tremendous potential for healing the experience of outsiderhood in women through their intimacy with Christ. We argue that this more fundamental healing of the injured feminine self through intimacy with Jesus is the experience that empowers women to respond to a call. For many women, the specificity of the choices which result from the Exercises are less important than the empowerment which results from the loving encounter with Jesus. It is there that women find the courage to continue to choose discipleship, to make an option for women which is first of all an option to be themselves free and spirit-filled. It is 'like being pregnant with the Spirit'. For such women

God is, God is in us and we live with God in all the originality of our female being, our history, questions and limits. God is the power, the energy driving us towards others to seek for something new, something greater than ourselves, but which will come upon this finite earth.<sup>24</sup>

And secondly, some women will make an option for women which leads them to struggle with all of their resources against situations of economic, social and ecclesial injustice as their way of joining Christ in his preferential love for the poor.

In this article we have traced the development of the option for the poor in ecclesiastical documents, along with its growing impact upon the lives of men and women in apostolic religious congregations. We have described how an understanding of the option for the poor explicitly as an option for women is emerging out of women's reflections on their experience. And finally, we have explored the implications of this developing 'feminist consciousness' within the Church for those giving the Exercises. It is our hope that this article

will contribute both to further conversations on this topic and to greater justice for women and children in poverty.

## NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> Dorr, Donal: *Option for the poor: a hundred years of Vatican social teaching* (Orbis Books: Maryknoll, New York, 1983), pp 11–86, covers well the development of Catholic social teaching from Leo XIII to Pius XII.
- <sup>2</sup> Moser, Mary Theresa: *The evolution of the option for the poor in France, 1880–1965* (Lanham, M. D.: University Press of America, 1985), pp 89–89 contains an analysis of the relationship of ecclesiology to the apostolic activity of the time.
- <sup>3</sup> Dorr: pp 87–89; 91–116 *passim*.
- <sup>4</sup> G.S. 69.1 (Abbott translation). Cited by Dorr, p 128.
- <sup>5</sup> G.S. 83–7. Cited by Dorr, p 121.
- <sup>6</sup> G.S. 69.1. Cited by Dorr, p. 122.
- <sup>7</sup> *The Church in the present day transformation of Latin America*, II, Conclusions.
- <sup>8</sup> *Justice in the world*, English translation (Rome: Vatican Press, 1971), #6. Cited in Dorr, p 187.
- <sup>9</sup> The 'Anita Hill' case has focused international attention on the issue of sexual harassment, and there is a growing body of literature on the socio-economic situation of women, both in developed and developing countries. A convenient summary of data gathered in an international perspective can be found in the *Human development report, 1991*, published for the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), and in the reports presented to the United Nations Committee on the Status of Women. These are summarized in the issues of *Women 2000* (Division for the Advancement of Women, Centre for Social Development and Humanitarian Affairs, Vienna International Centre, P.O. Box 500, A-1400 Vienna, Austria). This is a United Nations publication dedicated to promoting the goals of the Nairobi Forward-looking Strategies for the Advancement of Women. See also 'Partners in the mystery of redemption: a pastoral response to women's concerns for Church and society', *Origins* vol 17, no 45 (April 21, 1988), for a perspective on the situation of women in the United States.
- <sup>10</sup> *Documents of the 31st and 32nd General Congregations of the Society of Jesus*, an English translation of the official Latin texts of the General Congregations and of the accompanying Papal documents (Saint Louis: The Institute of Jesuit Sources, 1977), I, 48, p 411.
- <sup>11</sup> *Documents of the 33rd General Congregation of the Society of Jesus*, an English translation of the official Latin texts of the General Congregation and of related documents (Saint Louis: The Institute of Jesuit Sources, 1984), II, 52, p 63.
- <sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, II, 48, p 62.
- <sup>13</sup> *General Chapter, 1988, Society of the Sacred Heart of Jesus*, English translation (Rome: Villa Lante), p 18.
- <sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, p 19. See also *RSCJ: a journal of reflection*, 'Woman' vol IX, no 2 (Summer/Fall 1988), for additional documentation of the experiences and perspectives of these women religious.
- <sup>15</sup> Printed excerpt, courtesy of the Prioress of Ursuline Academy, Dallas, Texas.
- <sup>16</sup> McAuley, Catherine: 'Original Rule and Constitutions', Chapter One, 1841.
- <sup>17</sup> 'Sisters of Mercy Core Constitutions' 1986, # 3.
- <sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, #8.
- <sup>19</sup> The article of Marie-Eloise Rosenblatt, 'Women and the Exercises: sin, standards and New Testament texts', *The Way Supplement* 70 (Spring 1991), pp 16–32, contains a very good study of such issues.
- <sup>20</sup> Kathleen Fischer's *Women at the well: feminist perspectives on spiritual direction* (Mahwah: Paulist, 1988) is an excellent introduction to these themes. The Take and Receive Series by

Jacqueline S. Bergan and S. Marie Schwan helpfully presents the dynamics of the Exercises in metaphors and processes that are 'women friendly' (Winona: St Mary's Press, 1985-86).

<sup>21</sup> See Sandra Schneiders: *Women and the Word: the gender of God in the New Testament and the spirituality of women* (Mahwah: Paulist, 1986) for a helpful approach to these issues. See also Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza: *Bread not stone: the challenge of feminist biblical interpretation* (Boston: Beacon, 1984).

<sup>22</sup> *The Spiritual Exercises of St Ignatius* trans Louis J. Puhl (Chicago: Loyola University Press, 1951), # 167.

<sup>23</sup> See Tad Dunne: *Spiritual Exercises for today*, 'Pull and counterpull', pp 59-63, as a helpful description of social context in which to situate the meditation on the Two Standards (San Francisco: Harper, 1991). See also Brian O. McDermott 'With Him, in Him: the grace of the Spiritual Exercises' in *Studies of the spirituality of Jesuits* vol 18 (September 1986), pp 14-15, for the social dimensions of Christ's ministry in the Exercises. Albert Nolan's *Jesus before Christianity* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1978) could also be used to uncover the social context of Jesus' choices.

<sup>24</sup> Gebara, Yvonne: 'Option for the poor as an option for the poor woman', *Women, work and poverty*, *Concilium* 194, ed Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza and Anne Carr (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark Ltd, 1987).