

Applied Ethics in a World Church

THE PADUA CONFERENCE

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PART ONE

GLOBALIZATION, JUSTICE,
AND ENVIRONMENT

Opting for the Poor in the Face of Growing Poverty

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This is not the time to retell the well-known story of the “option for the poor”: how it began in the theology of liberation and was gradually incorporated into the Magisterium, first at the regional and then the universal level. This critical process, as encouraging as it seems, also has its ambiguities. The main one is that as the term gained acceptance in the universal hierarchy it lost some of its “historic bite,” as Gustavo Gutiérrez has said. We also know that its acceptance was accompanied by a careful purification of what was thought to be its “ideological roots.” It is also true that after accepting it, both the universal and the regional Magisterium began to abandon its use. What is most telling is the complete absence of the concept in the first encyclical of Pope Benedict XVI. Finally, although so much has been written on the subject, it doesn’t seem to have led to a reduction in poverty. On the contrary, despite the valid efforts that have been made in this sense, the topic still cries out for serious reflection and articulation, at least from the standpoint of Christian theology and ethics.

In my view, both the theology of liberation and the Magisterium have developed the option for the poor as an extraneous model. The goal of “freeing the poor” (Enrique Dussel), no matter how scriptural it is, needs to be internalized, engraved on the heart, and responsibly incorporated. The fact that it is presented as an extraneous model has detracted from its specific practical significance except in certain ecclesial sectors, such as the base Christian communities and many personal testimonies, as well as in religious communities that sought to instill it at the popular level.

I would like to share my experience in Argentina, a country best known until recently for its lack of poverty, or at least of misery, although that impression may have been exaggerated or partial, since there were always poor people. Regardless, poverty has grown at a dizzying pace since the mid-twentieth century — spectacularly so since the late 1990s.

My reflection stems from the drama suffered by our society as it saw itself trampled and mutilated in a long process.¹ Our problem is related to the new world economic order implanted in our country “in the Argentine

way”; that is, the economic and political crisis is ours, but in a context of global crisis. The historical peak of our crisis came in 2002, when poverty in Argentina stood at 57.5 percent and deep poverty at 27.5 percent² due to a long, deeply underlying process of injury to the people. The economic dimension also affected the cultural and moral dimension of our society, especially at its most peripheral and marginal levels. Not only was there a quantitative growth in poverty, but also in the forms of poverty: the elderly with meager or nonexistent pensions,³ homelessness,⁴ children abandoned or on the street, etc. So we are not speaking abstractly, but of real and specific poverty.

What does this situation mean for us, as Argentines and as Christians? First, we must understand poverty not only in terms of statistics, which are necessary but only give us a quantitative picture. We must enter into the existential, personal, and community significance of poverty, of misery, of marginalization, and of exclusion.

We Argentines must learn that *development is acceptable only if it is ethical*, that is, if it is understood and planned on the basis of justice,⁵ which means that any policy of growth must focus primarily on the least privileged.

Poverty Affects Us All

Our nation has become impoverished; we have all become impoverished. Poverty emerged in a specific time and occupies a specific space; its emergence, structuring, and shape are part of our history, but one that has yet to be written in our country. In the face of the recent economic growth (we have been growing by an average of almost 9 percent for the past four years), we are in danger of forgetting the tragic history of poverty, and thus repeating in the future the same mistakes of the past — or others that will lead to the same or even worse consequences.

Poverty, as a situation of injustice, is also *a situation of violence*. The poor themselves, many of them young people with a history of deprivation and aggression, are growing up in this institutionalized violence and will return to society what they have received from it; poverty has brought crime and violence.⁶ In addition, economic benefits are not equally distributed; one sector of the population is excluded, without future horizons, reduced to the most extreme misery.

Poverty, in its diverse manifestations (structural, contextual, inertial; rural or urban),⁷ produces *a new kind of human being* whose basic characteristic is the deprivation of the fundamental necessities for a dignified life. This occurs “within individuals, in their motivations, in the degree to which their values are internalized.”⁸ We still feel the effects of the crisis in the *structural poverty*, which is mainly seen on the outskirts of the large cities where it remains the reality in which many Argentines are born, grow, develop, and die. Thus, poverty is our reality, in contrast with the opulence that has emerged

at the same time. *But structural poverty is a fairly recent phenomenon in our country*, where it should not exist in view of the country's natural and human resources. It is therefore obvious, or perhaps not, that *poverty is a human creation* and thus subject to ethical judgment.

Poverty Generates a Culture

If culture is the way a human group expresses meaning,⁹ here it refers to the group of marginalized and excluded people who develop a new way of expressing their fundamental experiences.¹⁰ For them, it is the self-affirmation of the identity of a relatively closed, endogenous group. To the extent that the group is marginalized, it develops ways of life that are also expressed culturally. The group harbors those left exposed by their lack of employment and creates links of solidarity based on a common identity, often rooted in rebellion and resentment. Thus, the culture of deep poverty takes on violent and tragic connotations. Life loses its value, but the people are determined to give some meaning to an existence too absurd to accept. In the midst of perverse behavior there are reactions of solidarity, albeit a closed solidarity, often like that of the mafia: an intense but contextual solidarity.¹¹

At the extreme levels of poverty there is a loss of the cultural values that form the common value base of our people, provoking a detachment that is not only economic but also cultural, the result of the extreme privation they have suffered. Thus new value criteria, values and countervalues, emerge from the new culture of the poor.

Unemployment leads to a *crisis and reformulation of social roles*: the emergence of dysfunctional, depressed, devaluated males, and female heads of household who suffer from overwork and lack of understanding in a stressful and lonely situation. This leads to new kinds of gender relationships in the adult world, and between parents and children. The family nucleus is resented, interpersonal relations become unstable, neglect and a lack of discipline for children and adolescents increase. In this sense, *cultural poverty in turn generates more poverty*:¹² weaker links, declining motivation, shrinking horizons.

Poverty and Cultural Identity

Thus poverty affects cultural identity: who we are and what it means to be Argentine.

First, poverty changes our national identity by fragmenting it. We must remember that the gap between rich and poor has grown uncontrollably. In the mid-twentieth century, 40 percent of the Gross Internal Product (Gross Domestic Product) was distributed among wage earners; today it is only 20 percent, and even that distribution is increasingly unequal. In terms of

income distribution between the richest and poorest tenths of the population, in Argentina the difference increased from a ratio of 8:1 to 37:1 during the crises of 2001–2002.

Second, life in the big cities causes rootlessness and identity crisis in citizens. Migration due to poverty produces a tear in the original social fabric and the creation of a new fabric, with new cultural characteristics that bring about a new subjectivity tending toward massification.

Third, the creation of a powerful and often beneficent state has led many sectors of society to demand a share of power. This has led to group entitlements in our country, caused by the integration of diverse social sectors in the exercise of public power: first the radicalism of Irigoyen on behalf of the immigrant-descended middle class, then the justicialism of Perón for the predominantly Creole and *mestizo* working class. The rise of these new social actors was assisted by a process of polarization. In a *caudillo*¹³ culture such as ours, in some parts of the interior of our country people have become accustomed to not speaking out, to rallying around the *caudillo*, to taking orders from the political vanguard.¹⁴ An exception is the recent action of Msgr. Joaquín Piña in the Province of Misiones, which showed the ability of a people subjected to the servitude of political clientelism to react.¹⁵

There has also been a reaction against the invasion of the market culture, a closing off to outside influences, which leads many subcultures to isolate themselves from global culture or the globalization process — holding up traditional cultural forms and stereotypes more than cultural values as a means of self-defense.

Poverty has resulted in school-drop-outs, illiteracy, less access to higher education, and a deterioration in public education itself, especially in the provinces where maintaining discipline of children and adolescents has taken priority over providing them a quality education. At the same time, private education offers first-world levels of education for the minority who can afford it. This creates a paradox: that in a country with our high level of unemployment, corporations cannot fill their need for technicians and skilled labor. And this is one of the things that prevents us from overcoming poverty: one sector of the population cannot move forward economically for *structural* reasons. That is, no matter how much they want to join the work force, the conditions for doing so are not present: skill training and access, that is, information about the kind of workers the market needs, especially among youth.

Poverty Challenges the Legitimacy of Systems

Poverty challenges the legitimacy of the systems around which civilization coalesces. When this legitimacy is damaged, the bonds that cause these systems to function break. Economic life, democracy, and society itself become perversions of themselves.

Of the Economic System

The market and its laws need to be regulated by a political power with real social meaning. Political parties and trade unions must work for market regulation with a high degree of technical expertise so that the cure will not be worse than the disease; that is, so that regulation does not strangle the market but humanizes it and places it at the service of society (especially of the poorest) rather than against it.

Of the Political System

The highest levels of poverty have come in times of democracy, betraying its basic principles: freedom, equality, and participation. It is a task of the state to create the conditions to make citizenship a reality for everyone. In our capitalist society, the have-nots are unable to exercise their rights; that is, they are excluded from real citizenship.

Of the Constitution of Society

As poverty has increased, so has wealth, and the gap between rich and poor has grown. Misery and exclusion have gone hand in hand with opulence and the creation of wealthy enclaves. The social fabric has come apart in this society that moves at two speeds. The poor are not really citizens. Society must recognize them as citizens, by giving them full access to basic goods, allowing them to exercise not only their first-order but also their second- and third-order rights.

Ethical Challenges

At the beginning of this essay, I criticized the presentation of the option for the poor as an extraneous model. The question this raises is: why should I get involved in the struggle to eradicate poverty?

The first step in a commitment to eradicate structural poverty in our society is to take it on ourselves; that requires us to understand it, both quantitatively and qualitatively. Thus the ethical task must include *the basic imperative of challenging reality* (Xavier Zubiri). The reality is that poverty is growing spectacularly in both quantity and quality; that is, it affects human beings in their constitution and their dignity. For this reason, poverty is the principal ethical problem of a society: eradicating it is the fundamental imperative of all ethics, and it should be the principal goal of state policy. There is no justification for the existence of poverty in a country like ours. We must learn from the past and establish laws to protect the most vulnerable: the retirees who have so often been victimized by the state; the children born in poverty-stricken homes who need at least good food, health care, and education; the women who bear impossible burdens with their husbands absent and children to raise. The “hard core” of poverty is

the great challenge to any society, not only to mitigate but to eliminate it from a country as rich as ours in both raw materials and social capital.

This suggests that liberation must be reframed and reformulated, on the basis of solidarity.¹⁶ We urgently need an ethic that recognizes the linkages for the mending of the social fabric, which would enable us to reconstitute our society as a unity in plurality. Unity can be built only on the recognition of *asymmetry*. This means that responsibility must be lived out as “co-responsibility.” We need to rebuild community linkages on the basis of social justice.¹⁷

The principle of preference for the poor provides an “epistemological break,”¹⁸ an understanding given us by the experience of the poor, in this case not only the marginalized but even more the excluded. They have the last word on the legitimacy of systems.¹⁹ Therefore, recognition is the true form of understanding; that is, confronting truth as a totality, not indirectly or in part, and certainly not as a process imposed by the center on the margins.

Thus, the theological ethics of liberation understands the option for the poor as the *forma moralitatis*, a bias consciously present in all ethical reflection.²⁰ The option for the poor becomes the practical application of the search for universal interests. This is the only possible basis for integration and true communion. It is what makes human beings truly human.

But it is also necessary to rebuild a culture of work, of professional responsibility, of honesty and of effort, which are fundamental values for a society seeking to overcome the endemic vices that have contributed to the deplorable present situation: the law of minimum effort and even of deception, pretense, apathy, and idleness. We need to overcome clientelism, *caudillismo*, corruption, and other ways of compromising with a hopeless situation by leaving social responsibility to others.²¹

The church has a prophetic mission to denounce poverty as the fruit of structural, social, and individual sin.

The individual conscience in turn is called to an awareness of the poor that leads to commitment to their cause in order to fulfill the calling of community that faces every human being who seeks human fulfillment. The way to meet this challenge is through effective solidarity,²² through discernment as a way of seeking God’s will in history.²³ Solidarity considers the dignity of the poor in asymmetric relationships, and rather than suppressing that dignity seeks to promote it by involving the poor as protagonists on the way to their own social and personal liberation. But that cannot be done without building “communities of solidarity,”²⁴ which can bring together those who live in marginality or exclusion and integrate them into the social fabric. Such integration must be done not only from the top down but also from the bottom up, in a movement of reciprocal recognition and progressive integration.

— *English translation by Margaret D. Wilde*

Notes

1. S. Ciancaglini, “La miseria planificada,” in *Argentina: Un país desperdiciado* (Buenos Aires: Paradigma Libros, 2003), 149–53.

2. H. M. Yáñez, “Ante la irrupción de la pobreza, el despertar de las conciencias,” in *Suena la campana de palo: Ensayos de escucha a los pobres*, *Revista Proyecto* 15, no. 44 (Buenos Aires: Centro de Estudios Salesianos, 2003), 82.

3. The government of Néstor Kirchner recently established a pension for all those who have reached retirement age without making social security payments. It is a minimal amount, which is very helpful to those who have no stable income, but it is not enough to live in dignity.

4. D. Fares, “La vulnerabilidad de las personas en la calle,” in *De la solidaridad a la justicia: VII Jornada de Reflexión Etico-Teológica*, ed. H. M. Yáñez (Buenos Aires: Facultades de Filosofía y Teología, Universidad del Salvador, 2004).

5. D. García Delgado and M. G. Molina, “Ética y desarrollo: El conflicto de las interpretaciones,” in *Suena la campana de palo*, ed. Yáñez, 33–83.

6. “According to official statistics, in 2002 in metropolitan Buenos Aires the level of violence — already the highest in Argentina — increased by 50 percent from the previous year” (D. P. Gorgal, “Buenos Aires y La Ciudad de Dios,” *Valores en la Sociedad Industrial* 21, no. 56 [2003]: 39).

7. N. Redondo, “Pobreza urbana en Argentina desde un enfoque multidisciplinar hacia una praxis interdisciplinaria. Informe final: IV. Pobreza y reproducción social a fines de la convertibilidad,” 10. Available at www.uca.edu.ar/esp/sec-universidad/docs-investigacion/pdsa/2002/or-sociologica/docs/03-car-din-sit-pob-arg.pdf.

8. Editorial, *Valores en la Sociedad Industrial* 21, 56 (2003): 4.

9. T. Mifsud, “El imperativo ético de una cultura de la solidaridad,” in *La solidaridad como excelencia: VI Jornada de Reflexión Etico-Teológica*, ed. H. M. Yáñez (Buenos Aires: Facultades de Filosofía y Teología, Universidad del Salvador, 2003), 97.

10. A. R. Ameigeiras, “Religiosidad popular: Transformaciones socio-culturales y perspectivas de análisis a comienzos del siglo XXI,” *CIAS* 51, 519 (2002): 607–8.

11. J. Cela, “La cultura de la pobreza,” *Vida Nueva* 2267 (2001): 27.

12. *Ibid.*, 29.

13. A *caudillo* is a political-military leader, a “strongman.” Often used pejoratively, the term can also refer to charismatic populist leaders.

14. H. M. Yáñez, “El desafío ético de una cultura de solidaridad,” *Nuevas Propuestas: Revista de la Universidad Católica de Santiago del Estero* 34 (December 2003): 12.

15. Msgr. Joaquín Piña, S.J., bishop emeritus of the diocese of Puerto Iguazú in the Province of Misiones, headed an opposition slate in the election of a Constituent Assembly in the province, called by the ruling party to amend the provincial constitution and permit the indefinite re-election of the governor.

16. H. M. Yáñez, “Jalones para fundamentar una ética de la solidaridad esperante,” *Stromata* 56, nos. 1/2 (2000): 1–26.

17. A. Cortina, “Del intercambio infinito al reconocimiento compasivo,” *Stromata* 62, nos. 1/2 (2006): 71–84; H. M. Yáñez, “Del reconocimiento a la comunión: La responsabilidad ampliada: Comentario a la conferencia de Adela Cortina,” *Stromata* 62, 85–91.

18. J. C. Scannone, "Cuestiones actuales de epistemología teológica: Aportes de la teología de liberación," *Stromata* 46 (1990): 334.
19. A. González, "Fundamentos filosóficos de una 'Civilización de la Pobreza,'" *Estudios Centroamericanos (ECA)* 583 (May 1997): 417–23. The author cites Ignacio Ellacuría's affirmation that the poor question the legitimacy of the Western lifestyle.
20. M. Vidal, "La preferencia por el pobre, criterio de moral," *Studia Moralia* 20, no. 2 (1982): 279–304.
21. A. Gilotti, "Los vicios cívicos del cristiano en la sociedad Argentina," in *El Cristiano ante la Responsabilidad Ciudadana: VIII Jornada de Reflexión Ético-Teológica*, ed. H. M. Yáñez (Buenos Aires: Facultades de Filosofía y Teología, Universidad del Salvador, 2005).
22. H. M. Yáñez, "Ahora urge educar la solidaridad," *CIAS* 52, no. 526 (2003): 431–44.
23. T. Mifsud, *Moral de discernimiento*, vol. 1: *Moral fundamental: Libres para amar* (Santiago, Chile: San Pablo, 2002), 396–404.
24. 34th General Congregation of the Company of Jesus, *Decreto 3, Nuestra misión y la justicia*, no. 10; see also J. Alvarez de los Mozos, *Comunidades de solidaridad* (Bilbao: Mensajero, 2002).