

# Teocomunicação

Revista de Teologia da PUCRS

Programa de Pós-Graduação em Teologia  
Escola de Humanidades

Porto Alegre, v. 49, n. 2, julho-dezembro 2019 e34384

 <http://dx.doi.org/10.15448/0103-314X.2019.2.34384>

ARTIGO

## Biblical foundation and magisterial development of the dogmatic datum of the poor as a theological place

*Fundamento bíblico e desenvolvimento magisterial do dado dogmático do pobre como lugar teológico*

Ettore Marangi<sup>1</sup>

### ABSTRACT:

There are serious reasons to argue that with *Evangelii Gaudium* by Pope Francis, the magisterium of the Catholic Church has finally come to fully acknowledge the function of the locus theologicus played by the poor. This study, which constitutes the first of two articles devoted to the subject, investigates the foundation of this dogmatic datum in two sources of revelation: the Holy Scripture and the recent teachings of the magisterium. To this end, in the first place, it examines the role that the Old and New Testaments entrust to the poor within revelation; then it documents the rediscovery of the poor as theological place in the most important documents of the magisterium, during the time between Vatican Council II and *Evangelii Gaudium*.

**Keywords:** The poor. Theological place. Biblical theology. Option for the poor. *Evangelii Gaudium*.

### RESUMO:

Existem razões sólidas para arguir que, com a *Evangelii Gaudium*, do Papa Francisco, o Magistério da Igreja Católica, finalmente, passou a reconhecer a função do locus theologicus exercido pelos pobres. O presente estudo, que é o primeiro de dois artigos dedicados ao tema, investiga os fundamentos desse dado dogmático em duas fontes da revelação: a Sagrada Escritura e os ensinamentos recentes do Magistério. Para esse fim, examina-se, primeiramente, o papel atribuído aos pobres pelos Antigo e Novo Testamentos na revelação; em seguida, demonstra-se a redescoberta dos pobres como lugar teológico nos documentos mais importantes do Magistério durante o intervalo de tempo entre o Concílio Vaticano II e a *Evangelii Gaudium*.

**Palavras-chave:** Os pobres. Lugar teológico. Teologia bíblica. Opção pelos pobres. *Evangelii Gaudium*.

<sup>1</sup> Tangaza College / Nairobi, Kenya – email: [emarangi@tangaza.ac.ke](mailto:emarangi@tangaza.ac.ke) – ORCID iD: <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-6525-4712>



## THE LONG WAIT OF THE POOR IN THE CHURCH

The affirmation of *Evangelii Gaudium* (EG) according to which ‘for the church, the option for the poor is primarily a theological category’ (EG 198) has an importance that can hardly be overestimated because, with it, the controversial consideration of the poor as a theological place<sup>2</sup> begins to find full legitimacy within the teaching of the magisterium.<sup>3</sup> Throughout the history of Christianity, while on the one hand the poor have always been considered as privileged object and recipients of charity, on the other they have almost never been elevated to the role of subject and interlocutors of the Christian community, recognizing their particular ability to approach the mystery of God.<sup>4</sup> This situation was established only after the generation of Christians who close the New Testament era in which the poor had a role that was anything but passive. In the sub-apostolic era, Marcion is the only one to insist on the gospel datum that the good news is for the poor; for the rest, references to the poor emerge exclusively in the context of the importance attributed to beneficence, which is also recommended more for the personal salvation of those who do it than for the benefit that can be derived from those who receive it. Furthermore, an ascetic orientation that ends up exclusively exalting the inner detachment from material goods independently of the poor begins to emerge.<sup>5</sup>

This forgetfulness of the special mission of the poor in the life of the church also remains in the Middle Ages when theology becomes a more structured knowledge. In this period, the references to the poor are very limited and confined within the discussion about the extension of the Christian almsgiving, a theme which, afterwards, will be treated in a specific way by moral theology when, in the XVI century, it constitutes itself as an autonomous discipline. Even the first spirituality treatises will prefer to focus on the virtue of poverty by ignoring the concrete reality of the poor. A real turning point begins, from the second half of the XX century, with Vatican Council II (VCI) and the subsequent theological reflection, so much so that we could speak of an ‘irruption of the poor in the church’<sup>6</sup> and theology. The period of time that elapses between the dawn of Christianity, when the poor still had a central and active place in the life and reflection of the first communities, and the moment in which, after the council, one begins to ascribe again this place to them within the church is huge. This historical datum easily recalls the Franciscan tradition,<sup>7</sup> consecrated by the *Canto XI* of Dante’s *Paradise*, according to which Madonna of Poverty deprived of her first bridegroom, Christ, had to wait more

<sup>2</sup> The expression ‘theological place’ draws its origin from the 1563 treatise *De locis theologicis* by Melchior Cano. Taking his cue from *De oratore* by Cicero, Cano intends theological places as areas of documentation in which a theologian finds evidence in support of Catholic doctrines. He enumerates ten places or *loci*. The first seven are proper to theology: (1) Sacred Scripture, (2) apostolic traditions, (3) the universal faith of the body of believers, (4) synods and councils, (5) the papal magisterium, (6) Fathers of the church, and (7) scholastic theologians. The last three are improper as they are borrowed by theology: (8) natural reason, (9) the opinions of philosophers, and (10) history and human tradition. Cf. WICKS, J. *Luoghi Teologici*. In: LATOURELLE, R.; FISICHELLA, R. (ed.). *Dizionario di Teologia Fondamentale*, p. 645-646; TORRELL, J.-P., *La Teologia cattolica*, p. 34.

<sup>3</sup> When EG 198 declares that ‘for the church, the option for the poor is primarily a theological category rather than a cultural, sociological, political or philosophical one,’ pointing to the origin of this option in God, it attributes the quality of a real theological place to the poor. This is evident from the whole of the reflection the apostolic exhortation makes on the poor, from the very fact that the quality of *locus theologicus* is explicitly attributed to popular piety (EG 126)—which constitutes one of the ways in which the poor express their faith (cf. *Evangelii Nuntiandi* 48; *Aparecida Document* 263, <https://www.celam.org/aparecida/Ingles.pdf>, accessed 17 Dec. 2018; EG 125)—and finally from what the Pope later writes in *Veritatis Gaudium* 5: ‘The questions of our people, their suffering, their battles, their dreams, their trials, their worries possess an interpretational value that we cannot ignore if we want to take the principle of the Incarnation seriously. Their wondering helps us to wonder ourselves, their questions question us. All this helps us to delve into the mystery of the Word of God, the Word that requires and asks that we dialogue, that we enter into communion.’

<sup>4</sup> For what follows cf. CASTILLO, J. M. *I poveri e la teologia*, p. 21-25; GONZÁLEZ FAUS, J. I., *Vicari di Cristo*.

<sup>5</sup> Cf. HAUCK, F.; Bammel, E. *πρωτός*. In: KITTEL, G.; GRIEDRICH, G. (ed.). *Grande Lessico del Nuovo Testamento*, cols. 786-788. In these centuries, charity is practiced through alms as well as the *ministerium pauperum* which has a specific place in the instructions on the ordering of the community.

<sup>6</sup> Cf. INTERNATIONAL ECUMENICAL CONGRESS OF THEOLOGY. *La irrupción de los pobres en la Iglesia*.

<sup>7</sup> Cf. BONAVENTURE OF BAGNOREGIO, *Leggenda Maior* vii.1; THOMAS OF CELANO, *Vita Secunda* xxv; and *Sacrum commercium Sancti Francisci cum domina Paupertate*.

than almost a thousand and two hundred years to be married again, this time by Francis, the *poverello* of Assisi. Indeed, the poor too, privileged ‘friends’ of Christ, had to wait for almost a thousand and nine hundred years, much more than Madonna Poverty, to be considered again as friends and privileged interlocutors of the Christian community with full rights (cf. *EG* 198).

In this work, after analysing the data of the Holy Scripture which recognises the role of the poor in the salvific revelation of God, we follow the path made by the Magisterium, from VCII to *EG*, where the importance of the poor for the church and theology has finally been fully recognized.

## 1 WHO THE POOR ARE ACCORDING TO THE HOLY SCRIPTURE AND WHICH PLACE THEY OCCUPY IN THE HISTORY OF SALVATION

To treasure the contribution of the Holy Scripture to the topic in question, we believe it is important to first understand what it is meant by ‘the poor’, since people have the most varied ideas about the identity of the poor,<sup>8</sup> even within the Christian communities themselves. Later we examine the special place they enjoy within the revelation. In this two-part process, we first analyse the datum of Old Testament and then the datum of the New Testament, which enable us to highlight how the importance of the poor in Judeo-Christian revelation has been increasingly enriched. Finally, before drawing the due conclusions, we show how the Holy Scripture itself explicitly deduces from the centrality of the poor in the history of salvation the irreplaceable contribution that they offer to all those who wish to delve into the mystery of God.

### 1.1 THE POOR IN THE OLD TESTAMENT

In the Old Testament the poor are essentially designated by 4 words: ‘ānî, *dal*, ‘*ebjôn* and *rāš*. ‘Ānî represents ‘the lowered or afflicted’; this term at the beginning referred to the attitude of responding, then it ended up referring to the position of inferiority before one who demands an answer; it represents the humiliated, in fact its opposite is the term that indicates the arrogant and the despotic (*rāšā*’, *pārîs*, ‘*ošq*).<sup>9</sup> *Dal* represents ‘the skinny and the weak’; the term refers to a physical and social condition, in practice it refers to the oppressed (cf. Am 2:7). ‘*Ebjôn* represents the ‘mendicant’; the term refers to one who seeks to obtain almsgiving, and denotes the hungry person. *Rāš* refers to the ‘indigent,’ the term is used above all in the sapiential literature and describes in a generic way the figure of the poor as opposed to that of the rich starting from the common experience. It can

<sup>8</sup> The discussion about the criteria to be used to identify the poor is very heated because it is linked to the political and economic choices introduced to combat poverty. For example, the World Bank defined absolute poverty in purely economic terms, abstracting from the historical, geographical, social, political and cultural conditions of a given human group. Thus, using the Purchasing Power Parity exchange rate according to the standards established in 2015, it considered to be poor those who lived on less than \$ 1.90 a day. This enabled the World Bank to affirm the effectiveness of its neoliberal strategies in terms of reducing absolute poverty—cf. PEET, R. *Unholy Trinity*. However, recently, it has not only admitted that the rate of poverty reduction from 2013 to 2015 has decreased, but has also opened up to a multi-dimensional vision of poverty, which takes into account, in addition to household consumption, access to education and basic infrastructure as well—cf. WORLD BANK, *Poverty and Shared Prosperity 2018*. On the other hand, if, to get an idea of poverty in the world, we consider the number of undernourished people, we reach completely different results; in fact, this number has been on the rise since 2014 (reaching an estimated 821 million in 2017) returning to the levels of almost 10 years ago—cf. FAO, IFAD, UNICEF, WFP; WHO. *The State of Food Security and Nutrition in the World 2018*. One thing is certain: in the world there is a scandalous gap between the rich and the poor. According to CREDIT SUISSE. *Global Wealth Report 2018*, the bottom half of the world collectively owns less than 1% of total wealth, while top 10% of adults owns 85% of global wealth, and the top 1% accounts for 47% of all household wealth. This gap makes pathetic all those definitions of poverty that lead to avoiding the need to tackle the issue of inequality—also recognized by the Goal 10 of the *Sustainable Development Goals* of the United Nations’ *2030 Agenda*—without the fear of questioning the current global economic system.

<sup>9</sup> HAUCK, F.; BAMMEL, E. πτωχός. In: KITTEL, G.; GRIEDRICH, G. (ed.). *Grande Lessico del Nuovo Testamento*, cols. 717-721.

be said that these four terms define the poor both from an economic point of view—they are those who see themselves deprived from the minimum conditions for living—and a social point of view—they are those who have been cut off from society (cf. Ps 35:10; 37:14.16). In the Old Testament, therefore, the poor are presented as oppressed; which means that their economic and social situation is determined by oppressors. This kind of understanding of the reality of the poor corresponds to the affirmation that the poor must always be considered ‘dialectically poor.’<sup>10</sup> Thus, it is not surprising that they are often associated with other categories of people such as the persecuted, the unfortunate, the afflicted. Of course, a poor person is not always necessarily a socially excluded person, and vice versa, a socially excluded person is not always necessarily an impoverished person, but most often the lack of substances and social exclusion imply each other.<sup>11</sup>

Let us now consider the peculiar relationship that the poor hold with God in the Old Testament. According to the fundamental belief of Israel, the earth and its resources, which the Israelites have received as gifts, are under the right of property of Yhwh, and therefore it is absolutely not admitted that among them there can be a permanent impoverishment (cf. Dt 15:4.11). This faith becomes the reason that prompts the poor Israelite to place herself/himself and her/his hopes in the hands of God (cf. Ps 131), thereby transforming her/his humiliation into humility. The poverty of the spirit that characterizes her/him is therefore presented as the fruit of her/his economic poverty and social exclusion, illuminated by her/his faith in Yhwh, ‘Father of orphans, defender of widows’ (Ps 68:5).<sup>12</sup> This is why the Old Testament presents a whole series of situations in which the poor have a special relationship with God. The terms that designate the poor early end up denoting the attitude of the person praying before God, especially in the formula of the Psalms ‘ānî w’*’ebjôn* (cf. Ps 35:10; 37:14; 40:18; 70:6; 74:21; 86:1; 109:16.22). The secondary form of ‘ānî, *’anāwîm*, always used in the plural, ends up taking on a technical meaning and representing the category of the poor and humble towards whom God’s saving intervention in history is directed; and, in Zep 3:12-13, the poor (‘ānî wādāl) will constitute the rest of Israel, the poor and humble people, faithful to Yhwh, who will become the eschatological Israel.

## 1.2 THE POOR IN THE NEW TESTAMENT

In the New Testament, the ordinary term for one who is poor is πτωχός, ‘the beggar’; this word, which is etymologically connected with πτώσσω, ‘to cringe’, indicates the one who lacks everything.<sup>13</sup> In almost the total of 34 times in which it occurs in the New Testament, πτωχός refers to those who are economically poor; only 3 cases (cf. Mt 5:3; Ga 4:9; Rv 3:17) indicate spiritual poverty, but in all these cases a qualification is always added

<sup>10</sup> ELLACURÍA, I. *Conversione della Chiesa al Regno di Dio*, p. 137, where he adds, ‘If we were all poor because of the scarcity of available sources, we could not really speak of poor people.’ From this point of view, ‘the poor ... do not consist ... in any invalid and afflicted person, they too are, but not in a primary form’ (p. 88). After all, the Lukan beatitude on the poor does not directly speak ‘of the poor in the singular, but of the poor who form a body... here the beatitude does not concern a single and casual case, but something that draws attention because of its social impact and its religious and historical gravity’ (p. 125). The popular saying, quoted by CASTILLO, J. M. *I poveri e la teologia*, p. 226, applies here too: ‘the tree should not stop us from seeing the forest.’

<sup>11</sup> SOBRINO, J. *Gesù Cristo liberatore*, p. 143, which quotes a study by Joachim Jeremias.

<sup>12</sup> The attention of Yhwh towards the last is also manifested by his particular choices: his choice of the youngest, such as Jacob (cf. Gn 25:23; Rm 9:12), Ephraim (cf. Gn. 48:19), Gideon (cf. Jg 6:15), and David (cf. 1Sam 16 and 17); his choice of inadequate people such as Moses (cf. Ex 4:10; Jr 1:6); his choice of socially marginalized people such as Jephthah (cf. Jg 11:1-2); his choice of female figures such as Deborah and Jael (cf. Jg 4:9; 5:24), Ruth who is also a widow and a foreigner (cf. Rt 1:4-5), Judith who is also a widow (cf. Jdt 8:2), Esther who is also an orphan (cf. Est 2:7), and especially the barren Hannah (cf. 1Sam 1:2); his choice of the people of Israel itself, who were the smallest of all peoples (cf. Dt 7:7)—and when Israel became proud of this, God said that he had also chosen the Cushite, the Philistine and the Syrian (cf. Am 9:7)—and finally his choice of geographically insignificant places such as Bethlehem (cf. Mi 5:1).

<sup>13</sup> The other Greek term for a poor person, πέννης, refers to one who lives by his or her work, who lives frugally. The πένντες normally represent the social class opposite to the rich, the πλούσιοι; the πτωχοί, therefore, constitute the extreme opposite of the latter (cf. HAUCK, F.; Bammel, E. πτωχός, col. 715).

to the noun. Like the Old Testament, the New Testament also underlines the connections between scarcity of resources and social exclusion, so the poor are always taken into consideration in the multiplicity of their concrete situations. Those who are considered poor or otherwise associated with them are the following: the blind, the lame, the leper, the deaf, the crippled (cf. Mt 11:5; parallel: [//] Lk 7:22; 14:13), prisoners, the oppressed (cf. Lk 4:18-19), the smallest (ἐλάχιστος), the hungry, the thirsty, the naked, foreigners, the sick, (cf. Mt 25:35-44; Lk 6:21), the little (μικρός), children, the simple (νήπιος), the tired (cf. Mt 11:25; //Lk 10:21; Mt 11:28; 18,2-6; //Mk 9,36-37.42; //Lk 9,47-48; 17,2; Mt 18:10.14; 21,14-16), widows (cf. Mk 12:42; //Lk 21:2); the afflicted or those who mourn (cf. Mt 5:4; //Lk 6:21). To these categories of persons the followings must also be added: women in general (cf. Mk 15:40-41; //Lk 23:49; //Mt 25:55; Lk 8:2-3); public sinners like publicans and prostitutes (cf. Mt 21:31; Lk 15:1), people who are considered impure (Mt 9:22; //Mk 5:34; //Lk 8:48); and ‘heretics’ such as Samaritans (cf. Lk 9:52; 10:33; 17:16; Jn 4:9-48; 8:48). These categories of people are not explicitly associated with the poor, but we must think that they too are part of them because they belong to the grouping of the so-called oppressed and those who mourn are explicitly associated with the poor;<sup>14</sup> as for the poor, even for this last-mentioned category of people, Jesus’ ministry is a source of hope and rehabilitation in a context heavily marked by social exclusion due to sexual and religious discrimination.

In continuity with the Old Testament, also in the New Testament all these categories of people, belonging to the poor or united with them, are presented dialectically. Those who oppose them are the following: the proud, the powerful, the rich, the well-fed, those who laugh, those of whom all people speak well (cf. Lk 1:51-53; 6:20-26; 14:15-24; 16:19-22; Jm 2:6), the great (μεγάλοι), kings, the leaders of the nations, who call themselves benefactors (cf. Mk 10:42-43; //Mt 20:25-26; //Lk 22:25-26), scholars, the learned (cf. Mt 11,25), Pharisees, scribes, lawyers (cf. Mt 23:13-32; //Lk 11:39-47; Lk 18:11), priests, Levites (cf. Mt 8:8; //Mk 1:44; //Lk 5:14; Lk 1:5.11.26-27; 10:3-33), high priests and the elders (cf. Jn 11:32.47.57; Mt 21:23; //Mk 11:27; //Lk 20:1). This dialectical vision of society in its economic, social, political, cultural and religious aspects is witnessed by one of Jesus’ most widespread saying in which the eschatological reversal is promised: ‘many who are first will be last, and the last first’ (Mt 19:30, 20:16; //Mk 10:31; //Lk 13:30; GTh. 4,2a; POxy 654,4,2a; Barn 6,13a).<sup>15</sup>

In the New Testament, economic poverty and social marginalization, thanks to the ministry of Jesus of Nazareth, give rise to a specific spiritual experience that deepens and surpasses the Old Testament spirituality of the ‘*anāwīm*, so much so as to present itself as a privileged way to plumb the mystery of the Triune God itself. In examining the spirituality of which the poor in the New Testament are bearers, we take three steps. Firstly, we analyse the teaching of Jesus in the gospels, which mainly presents four topics linked with each other: the special relationship between the poor and faith, the poor as the first members of the new people of God, the invitation for those who are not poor to share their wealth with the poor as the root of a new aspect of the spirituality of the ‘*anāwīm*’, and finally Jesus’ personal choice of being poor among the poor. Secondly, we deal with the theological consequences that, in the light of the Easter event, the Pauline letters draw from Jesus’ choice to become poor. Thirdly, we take into consideration the way in which the first generations of Christians embraced this deeper theological understanding of the role played by the poor in the history of salvation.

<sup>14</sup> In the Bible, those who mourn are those who cry because of some form of oppression, and not because of some form of depression (cf. Qo 4:1).

<sup>15</sup> Cf. CROSSAN, J. D. (ed.). *Saying parallels*, p. 170. It is important to note that the partiality of God is not opposed to his impartiality, but is a consequence of it: ‘The Lord is a judge who is utterly impartial. He never shows partiality to the detriment of the poor, he listens to the plea of the injured party’ (Si 35:12-13).



In continuity with the spirituality of the *'anāwīm*, according to the gospels, the poor and the categories associated with them continue to be 'those who have faith'. In fact the true believers are the following: the sick or people intimately bound to them (cf. Mt 8:10.13; 9:2.22.28.29; 15:28; Mk 2:5; 5:34.36; 10:52; Lk 7:9; 8:48.50; 17:19; 18:42); sinners (cf. Mt 9:2; //Mk 2:5; //Lk 5:20), tax collectors (cf. Mt 21:32) and prostitutes (cf. Mt 21:32; Lk 7:50); the impure (cf. Mt 9:22; //Mk 5:34; //Lk 8:48; 17:19), two pagans (cf. Mt 8:10; //Lk 7:9; Mt 15:28), a Samaritan (cf. Lk 17:19), the 'little ones' (cf. Mt 18:6; Mk 9:42), the widow trampled by injustice (Lk 18.8), a blind beggar (cf. Lk 18:35.42); and before all of them Mary the mother of Jesus (cf. Lk 1:45) a woman of the people (cf. Mk 6:3). Instead, 'those who have no faith' are the following: the high priests, the scribes and the elders (cf. Mt 21:25; //Mk 11:31; //Lk 20:5; Mt 21:32; 27:42; //Mk 15:32; Lk 22:67); those who are afraid (cf. Mt 8:26; //Mk 4:40), those who cannot resist temptation (cf. Lk 8:13), those who are attached to money (cf. Mt 6:19-24); the relatives of Jesus and the inhabitants of Nazareth in general (cf. Mt 13,58; //Mk 6:6; Jn 7:5); and before them, the priest Zechariah (cf. Lk 1:20).<sup>16</sup>

As it is for the book of the prophet Zephaniah, also for Jesus there exists a special relationship between the poor and the new people of God. However, in the gospels, not only does he make these poor and marginalized people the specific recipients of the announcement of good news (cf. Mt 11:5; //Lk 7:22; 4:18), but he also comes to affirm that right now the kingdom of God belongs exactly to them, for the simple fact of being poor according to what is explicitly stated in the Beatitudes of Luke (cf. Lk 6:20). Of course, the kingdom of God can belong even to those who do not count among this group of people, but only on the condition that they voluntarily make themselves poor in solidarity with those who are poor and excluded independently of their will. This is indeed the meaning of the Matthean beatitude of the 'poor in spirit' (Mt 5:3), which should rather be translated 'blessed are the poor *for* the spirit' or 'blessed are the poor *with* spirit.'<sup>17</sup> As a matter of fact, the Matthean beatitude on the poor cannot refer to a merely inner detachment from riches, since the renunciation of one's possessions constitutes one of the essential elements of the call to discipleship (cf. Mt 19:27-29; //Mk 10:28-30; //Lk 18:28-30; 14:33), and the participation in the same mission of Jesus excludes the possession of particular economic resources (cf. Mt 10:9; //Mk 6:8; //Lk 9:3; Ac 3:6). Nor can it simply refer to a choice of external poverty, inwardly motivated by the contempt for material goods, as it can be inferred from the contrast between the cynical philosophers and Jesus of Nazareth. When philosopher Crates of Thebes gets rid of his wealth, he is persuaded by Diogenes to throw the money in his possession into the sea;<sup>18</sup> instead, when Jesus invites the rich man to follow him, he asks him first of all to sell his substance and to give the proceeds to the poor (cf. Mt 19:16-22; //Mk 10:17-22; //Lk 18:18-23). For the Christian, therefore, giving one's riches to the poor is not a way like any other to get rid of one's own possessions, but a choice of sharing that becomes indispensable for following Jesus of Nazareth (cf. Mt 6:19-21; //Lk 12.33-34; Mt 19:21).

This invitation to voluntary poverty, as a consequence of the solidarity with the last ones, in order to follow Jesus, represents a novelty compared to the spirituality of the *'anāwīm*. Therefore, it is in this particular element that we can discover the emergence of a new spirituality, associated with the poor, richer than that of the Old Testament. The Beatitudes of Matthew (cf. 5:3-12) are an expression of this new spirituality. In this version

<sup>16</sup> CASTILLO, J. M. *I poveri e la teologia*, p. 221-226, which also points to the surprising fact of the lack of faith of the disciples close to Jesus.

<sup>17</sup> Cf. MAGGI, A. *Padre dei Poveri*, p. 64-68—in which the author quotes several Fathers of the church who support his interpretation of the passage—and ELLACURÍA, I. *Conversione della Chiesa al Regno di Dio*, p. 134, respectively.

<sup>18</sup> Cf. Diogenes Laërtius, *The Lives and Opinions of Eminent Philosophers*, 6.87. According to Philostratus, *Life of Apollonius of Tyana*, 1.13, even Apollonius followed his example by giving all his possessions to his relatives.

of the Beatitudes, the repetition of the same wording with the verb in the present, ‘for theirs is the kingdom of heaven’ (Mt 5:3; 5:10),<sup>19</sup> at the beginning and end of the eight Beatitudes creates a literary unit (cf. Mt 5:3-10), with the result that the eight categories of people who are proclaimed blessed appear to be related to each other. In particular, the ‘poor in spirit’ of the first beatitude and ‘the persecuted for the sake of justice’ of the last beatitude end up coinciding, since both are promised the Kingdom and for both the stated promise is realized in the present, and not in the future, just as for the other six categories of people. Consequently, to those who voluntarily choose a poverty of sharing (cf. Mt 5:3), in order to put themselves at the service of the justice of the Kingdom (cf. Mt 5: 6.10a.20), that is, those who take on the same mission as Jesus (cf. the parallel between Mt 5:10 and 5:11),<sup>20</sup> placing themselves in the wake of the prophets (cf. Mt 5:12), it is made known that they will participate in the destiny of their persecuted teacher (cf. Mt 10:24-25.28), and for this same reason they will have to rejoice because their reward is great in the heavens. In this way, spiritual poverty in the New Testament, in addition to hoping everything from God because everything has been received from him, also involves entrusting oneself totally to him, and receiving from him a specific mission, which consists in placing oneself at the service of the coming of the Kingdom (cf. Mt 16:24; //Mk 8:34; //Lk 9:23; Mt 10:38; //Lk 14:27), thereby entering into conflict with the same powers of this world that crucified Jesus. Clearly, this new aspect of the spirituality of the ‘*anāwîm*’ is not only the prerogative of the haves, in the gospels there is nothing to suggest that the Beatitudes of Lk are directed to the poor while those of Mt only to the rich. We must rather think that the message of the Beatitudes of Lk and that of the Beatitudes of Mt complement each other: the materially poor of Lk are called to become the spiritually poor of Mt, while the rich who aspire to become the spiritually poor of Mt are first called to become the materially poor of Lk.<sup>21</sup> If we agree that the Kingdom of God does not represent a geographic-political reality, a celestial reality accessible in the afterlife, or a mere inner or cultic experience, but every place where God reigns, and we agree on the fact that its fundamentally spiritual character should necessarily have political, economic, social and cultural implications, then we must also recognize that the conflictual mission of the poor in spirit necessarily entails a political, economic, social and cultural transformation of the whole reality.

In conclusion, we must not fail to underline that, if Jesus of Nazareth proposes to his disciples to embrace such poverty, it is because, first of all, he chooses it for himself (cf. Mt 8:19-20; //Lk 9:57-58), entrusting himself completely to the Father (cf. Mt 6:25-34; //Lk 12:22-32); doing the will of the Father is in fact his food (cf. Jn 4:34; Mt 26:39; //Mk 14:36; //Lk 22:42).<sup>22</sup>

Subsequently, the light of the Easter faith allows the first Christian community to see in the earthly Jesus’ choice of poverty the Son of God’s choice to become poor. Moreover, his entire history with humanity—from his incarnation to his glorification—which is to be understood as the story of the gift that he makes of himself to humankind, is expressed in terms of poverty in a context (cf. 2Co 8:1-24) that recalls once again the necessity for sharing: ‘Though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, so that you by his

<sup>19</sup> FABRIS, Rinaldo. *Matteo*, p. 112.

<sup>20</sup> FABRIS, Rinaldo. *Matteo*, p. 123. The commentary specifies that ‘a generic belonging to Christ is not enough to transform persecution into a reason for joy, the authentication of proof is found in ‘justice’, that is, in the integral and practical adhesion to the will of God, which is concretized in the project of Christian life.’

<sup>21</sup> After all, a beatitude associated with the persecution ‘on account of the Son of man’ is also addressed to the poor of the gospel of Lk (cf. Lk 6:22-23).

<sup>22</sup> For these reasons we could speak of Jesus as the Messiah of the poor, cf. DUPONT, J. *Gesù Messia dei poveri, Messia povero*, p. 7-87. The expression had already been used with great awareness by Cardinal G. Lercaro in a conference held in Jounieh (Beirut) during the years of the Council: ‘And yet we should investigate the ecclesiological extensions of these two characteristics of Jesus, the Messiah of the poor and the poor Messiah,’ in LERCARO, G., *Per la forza dello Spirito*, p. 155. It has become an expression used in official documents of the magisterium from 1986; we find it in *Libertatis Conscientia* 66 and *Redemptoris Mater* 37.

poverty might become rich' (2Co 8:9). From this perspective, the series of choices of the Son of God—his choice to become a human being in an insignificant village of a detested land like Galilee; his choice to work as a carpenter in a society that was under the yoke imposed by the Roman empire; his choice to undertake an itinerant activity of prophet and healer serving the impoverished and marginalized masses, and therefore to challenge the religious authorities of the Temple of Jerusalem; and finally his choice to let himself to be crucified as a political criminal and to die making the experience of the abandonment by God—allows the first Christians to understand his life as a progressive sharing of all kinds of humanity's poverties up to the κένωσις-ταπεινώσις, that is, the most total self-emptying and self-lowering (cf. Phil 2:6-11).<sup>23</sup> In short, the cross itself turns out to be the hallmark of the poverty of the Son of God.<sup>24</sup> We, thus, understand well how it is that the theology of our century, in delineating the spirituality of the poor for/with spirit, has defined them as 'the crucified people', who are the victims of the sin of the world as well as those who will bring salvation to the world.<sup>25</sup>

The new spirituality of poverty, brought about by Jesus' life and teaching and rooted by post-Easter theology in the kenosis-sharing of the Son of God, plays an important role, albeit with different nuances, in the life of the I century Christian communities. Unfortunately, its influence ends up already at the beginning of the II century,<sup>26</sup> without, however, completely dying out in the course of the church's history, where it has surfaced here and there, like a karst spring until today.<sup>27</sup> To highlight the crucial role played by the spirituality of poverty in the early Christian communities we take into consideration the data emerging from the Acts of the Apostles, the Pauline letters, the Letter of James and the Book of Revelation. The Christians of the Jerusalem community, from the beginning, go beyond the sheer social assistance, already practiced in the synagogues.<sup>28</sup> One of the first consequences of the faith in the resurrection of the Lord is in fact that 'there was not a needy person among them' (Ac 4:34) because, despite the difficulties that arouse among them (cf. Ac 5:1-11; 6:1-7), they practiced the sharing of goods (cf. Ac 2:44-45; 4:32-37).<sup>29</sup> In fact, spiritual communion was reached precisely through the communion of material goods.<sup>30</sup> The church in Jerusalem, besides, stands out among the other communities precisely

<sup>23</sup> Paul makes this kenotic spirituality his own by not serving others from above but identifying himself with them (cf. 1Co 9:22; Rm 12:15).

<sup>24</sup> In the early Middle Ages, a saying of St. Jerome, *nudus nudum Christum sequi*, that is 'naked to follow the naked Christ,' will be chosen precisely to express the following of Jesus' poverty with a clear reference to the nudity of the cross, cf. MORMANDO, F. *Nudus nudum Christum sequi*, p. 171-197.

<sup>25</sup> Cf. ELLACURIA, I. *Conversione della Chiesa al Regno di Dio*, p. 68. The author, however, states that they can bring salvation to the world only inasmuch as they constitute a 'resurgent' people: 'only a people who live because they have risen from the death inflicted to them are able to save the world' (p. 69).

<sup>26</sup> Cf. FRIESEN, S. J. *Injustice or God's Will?*, p. 17-36. The change in tone is already felt consistently in Clement of Alexandria, *Who is the Rich Man That Shall Be Saved?*, which takes on a rather stoic position with regard to wealth.

<sup>27</sup> Without the aim of being exhaustive or the intention to idealize all the cases we cite, we can say that phenomena of emergence of this karst spring are the followings: the life of the primitive Christian community, the preaching of some great pastors and theologians of the early centuries—such as: Ambrose, John Chrysostom, Gregory the Great, Basil—the Franciscan movement, the Hussite movement, the Christian socialism of the XIX century (before the apostasy of the working class took place from the church, according to what Pius IX declared in *Quadragesimo Anno* 123-124.132), the movement of the workers' priests, VCII and the experience of the Latin American base communities.

<sup>28</sup> HAUCK, F.; BMMEL, E. *πρωτός*, col. 752. If Christianity had limited itself to this, it would not have introduced any novelty about our relationship towards the poor. Social assistance for the poor is a common feature of many religious traditions: in the Muslim world, *zakat*, a form of alms-giving, is one of the five Pillars of Islam; also in Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism and Sikhism, charity towards the needy, namely *dāna*, is held in high esteem.

<sup>29</sup> Although this choice of the early Christian community vanishes in the following centuries, still in the Middle Ages we find a tradition according to which the possessions of the church are designated as *patrimonium pauperum*, that is, the possession of the poor (cf. Gratian, *Decretum* 2.16.68: *Quicquid habent clerici pauperum est*; Pseudo-Augustine, *Ad fratres in eremo commorantes*, 40, 1269: *Bona Ecclesiarum patrimonium pauperum sunt*; Arnulf of Lisieux, *Sermones* 201, 0160D: *Possumus itaque licite divitias possess, si tamen earum nos non reputaverimus dominos, sed ministros; si intellexerimus patrimonium pauperum esse patrimonium Christi*; finally Peter Of Blois, *Epistola XV*, calls the church's possessions *patrimonium Christi et pauperum eius*.

<sup>30</sup> CONGAR, Y. Les biens temporels de l'Eglise d'après sa tradition théologique et canonique, 247-249, points out that in the New Testament κοινωμία is, above all, communion of earthly goods (cf. Heb 13:16; Ac 2:44-45; 4:32; 2Co 8:3-4; 9:13; Rm 15:26-27), then also the union of the faithful with Christ in the Eucharist (cf. 1Co 10:16) and finally the union of Christians with the Father and the Son in the Spirit (cf. 1Jn 1:3.6; 1Co 1:9; 2Co 13:13; Fil 2:1).



because of her poverty lived ‘with spirit’ (cf. Rm 15:26; Ga 2:10). The Pauline communities belong to the socioeconomic category of the lower stratum (cf. 1Co 1:26). Although they did experience tensions, within them, between the many poor and marginalized, on the one side, and the few rich and influential people, on the other side (cf. 1Co 11:17-34),<sup>31</sup> they strove to live their situation ‘with spirit’ under the guidance of Paul (cf. 1Co 1:18-2:16),<sup>32</sup> being open to sharing with other needy communities (cf. 2Co 8:1-2.14). In reality it could not be otherwise, since the spirituality of poverty, in its relation to the event of Christ’s cross, is a key characteristic of Paul’s apostolate (cf. 1Co 4:11-13),<sup>33</sup> for him the apostles are placed by God not at the first but at the last place (cf. 1Co 4:9),<sup>34</sup> and they must choose to be poor to make many rich (cf. 2Co 6:10). The letter of James testifies to a greater entrance of the rich in the Judeo-Christian communities to which it is addressed (cf. Jm 2:6-7), and the consequent birth of some forms of discrimination against the poor, which are antithetical to the values of the Kingdom (cf. Jm 2,1-4). In this context, by stigmatizing the rich (cf. Jm 4:13-5:6), on the one hand, the author of the letter strongly reiterates Jesus’ teaching of God’s predilection for the poor, who love him and are rich in faith (cf. Jm 2:5), on the other, he states that the only acceptable religion for a Christian is the practice of love for the weakest (cf. Jm 1:27).<sup>35</sup> Finally, the Christian communities that produced the book of the Revelation conceive of themselves as an alternative to the Roman Empire (cf. Rv 13) and its economic system (cf. Rv 18), a structural incarnation of Evil (cf. Rv 12 :17-18). They too are ‘poor for/with spirit’ communities, since their poor are not to be counted among those who receive the mark of the second beast (cf. Rv 13:16), but among those who suffer poverty freely, since as followers of the Crucified-Risen Christ (cf. Rv 14:1-5) they oppose the empire, thereby remaining excluded from the system of distribution of wealth (cf. Rv 13:17).

### 1.3 THE EXPLICIT RECOGNITION OF THE ROLE OF THE POOR IN THE HISTORY OF SALVATION IN THE HOLY SCRIPTURE

What has been said should suffice to recognize that according to the Holy Scripture the poor, and especially ‘the poor for the spirit’, are a privileged place to meet and know God. However, it must be added that both the Old Testament and the New Testament affirm it explicitly.

Highlighting the ambiguity of all that has to do with the reality of the sacred. The prophetic literature invites us to seek the Lord by giving freedom to the oppressed, doing justice to the orphan and the widow, sharing the bread with the hungry, introducing the poor into one’s house, dressing those who are naked, and not oppressing the stranger (cf. Am 5:5-7.21-25; Is 1:11-17; 58:2-10; 66:1-2; Jr 7:1-7; Mi 6:6-8; Zp 2:1-3); and this is indeed the best way to know God (cf. Is 1:3; Jn 9:23; 22:16; Ho 6:6).

In the Synoptics, Jesus explicitly identifies with the poor and the little ones (cf. Mt 18:5; //Mk 9:37; //Lk 9:48; Mt 25:40.45), who enjoy a special relationship with God (cf. Mt 18:10).<sup>36</sup> He affirms that the Father, through the Son, reveals precisely to them (νήπιον) the

<sup>31</sup> In this context, lack of sharing is recognized as a fundamental reason that prevents the community from celebrating the Lord’s Supper; this teaching returns in a way in the *Letter of Barnabas* 19.8 (‘if you share in that which is imperishable, how much more in those things that are perishable?’) and echoes in *Didache* 4.8 as well.

<sup>32</sup> We must not forget that the power of the cross manifested in the most insignificant people—by which they can spiritually take on their own situation accessing the wisdom that comes from the Spirit and shames human wisdom (cf. 1Co 1:27)—is not confined only at the moment of the crucifixion but is the same that has resurrected Jesus (cf. 1Co 6:14; 2Co 13:4).

<sup>33</sup> Hence Paul’s conscious choice to work with his own hands (cf. 1Ph 4:11-12; 2 Th 3:6-12; 1Co 9:13-18; Ep 4:28).

<sup>34</sup> This passage is overlooked by most of the ecclesiologies, which are quick to show that the apostolate is the first in the lists of charismas (cf. BARBAGLIO, G. *Le lettere di Paolo*, vol. 1, p. 297).

<sup>35</sup> CASTILLO, J. M. *Simboli di libertà*, p. 97-98.

<sup>36</sup> The identification that Jesus establishes between himself and the poor, which recalls the intimate relationship established by some pas-

mysteries of the Kingdom<sup>37</sup> hiding them from the wise and intelligent (cf. Mt 11:25-27; // Lk 10:21-22; Jn 7:47-49).<sup>38</sup> The Pauline equivalent of this message is the affirmation that the proclamation of the cross of Christ (cf. 1Co 1:18.23) is inaccessible to the wise and intelligent (cf. 1Co 1: 19-20) while it is welcomed by those who are humanly considered insignificant from all points of view (cf. 1Co 1:26-28). Finally, the Johannine literature places itself in the same line of the Synoptics and Paul by proposing the teaching of Jesus in the synoptics on the poor in terms of love/ἀγάπη. For 1Jn, the gift that Christ makes of his own life reveals the true meaning of love/ἀγάπη, which cannot dwell in Christians if they do not give their own life. In doing so, the very first step is to share their means of subsistence with those in need (cf. 1Jn 3:16-17). However, if this operative love (cf. 1Jn 3:18) fails, the knowledge of God becomes impossible (cf. 1Jn 4:7-8).

#### 1.4 CONCLUSIONS: IN CHRISTIANITY SHARING WITH THE POOR AND THE MYSTICISM OF THE CROSS ARE INSEPARABLE

At the end of this brief examination of the biblical datum, we can draw some conclusions. Even if we may theologially agree that ‘the worst poverty is not to know Christ,’<sup>39</sup> we must immediately add that the Holy Scripture agrees with those who say that, first of all, the poor are those who never come to develop, those who ‘die before time,’<sup>40</sup> ‘the non-person,’<sup>41</sup> ‘the others of a society constructed without regard for, or even over against, the most basic rights.’<sup>42</sup> Only by considering those for whom living is not something obvious<sup>43</sup> as the *analogatum princeps*<sup>44</sup>—the category of people from which one has to start to make analogies—it is possible to call even other human groups poor.

From the spiritual point of view, all the Holy Scripture maintains that between the poor and God there is a special relationship but with different nuances in the Old Testament and New Testament. In the Old Testament, on the one hand, God always stands on the side of the poor and excluded, even regardless of their moral condition; on the other hand, the experience of precarious life and social marginality, to which the poor are subjected, opens them the path of humility of heart, with the result that they become more willing to welcome Him in their life. The New Testament takes on the message of the Old Testament and develops it. The poor and the rich are called to voluntarily take poverty on, live a real communion with the brothers and sisters who suffer in a situation of misery and oppression, and follow Jesus, who is himself poor, by putting themselves at the service of his mission as announcer and bearer of the Kingdom. This mission, which inevitably places them in conflict with the oppressors and leads to the total self-emptying expressed

---

sages of the Old Testament between God and the poor (cf. Pr 14:31; 17:5; 19:17; Sir 4:6.10), will lead to the affirmation of the poor as vicars of Christ (Peter of Blois, *Epistola XCI: ‘Pauper Christi vicarius est’*) and their sacrament (CUSMANO, G. Predica tenuta nella IV Domenica di Quaresima del 1884): ‘The Poor! They are like another sacrament, because in the person of the poor Jesus is hidden. Thus, you are a great thing, oh poor people of Jesus Christ! He spent a great part of his divine mission for you, he raised your poverty to a sacrament, making you an object of worship.’ However, before these precise expressions were used, the Tradition had already highlighted the intimate relationship between the Eucharistic body and the body of the poor (cf. John Chrysostom, *In Evangelium S. Matthaei, hom. 50.3-4*): ‘Do you wish to honour the body of Christ? Do not ignore him when he is naked. Do not pay him homage in the temple clad in silk, only then to neglect him outside where he is cold and ill-clad. He who said, ‘This is my body’ is the same who said, ‘You saw me hungry and you gave me no food’, and ‘Whatever you did to the least of my brothers you did also to me’ ... What good is it if the Eucharistic table is overloaded with golden chalices when your brother is dying of hunger! Start by satisfying his hunger and then with what is left you may adorn the altar as well.’

<sup>37</sup> The expression ‘these things’ refers to the mysteries of the Kingdom (cf. Mt 24:3; //Mk 13:4; //Lk 21:7; Mt 13:11; //Mk 4:10; //Lk 8:10).

<sup>38</sup> Another datum in favour of this thesis, whose implications deserve to be analysed, is the fact that in the synoptic tradition the god of riches, Mammon, is the highest expression of idolatry (cf. Mt 6:24; //Lk 16:13).

<sup>39</sup> BENEDICT XVI. *Message of His Holiness Benedict XVI for Lent 2006*.

<sup>40</sup> GUTIÉRREZ, G. *La forza storica dei poveri*, p. 93; 107.

<sup>41</sup> GUTIÉRREZ, G. *La forza storica dei poveri*, p. 110; 244.

<sup>42</sup> GUTIÉRREZ, G.; MÜLLER L. *On the Side of the Poor*, chap. 3, Kindle.

<sup>43</sup> SOBRINO, J. *Gesù Cristo liberatore*, p. 153.

<sup>44</sup> ELLACURÍA, I. *Conversione della Chiesa al Regno di Dio*, p. 35.

by the cross, thus represents the point of arrival of the choice of Christian poverty. The different Christian communities of the I century take creatively on Jesus' choice of life. However, the most surprising thing is that they develop a theological reflection that comes to attribute to the category of poverty the capability to fathom the depths of the divine mysteries, in particular the event of the incarnation of the Son of God, which finds its consummation in his passion, death and resurrection. This is why it is quite natural for them to recognize that the door that gives access to the mysteries of the Kingdom and the reality of love/ἀγάπη, which constitutes the essence of the intimate life of God, is truly open to the poor only and to those who, for them and with them, become voluntarily poor.

## 2 THE ROLE OF THE POOR IN THE CHURCH REDISCOVERED: THE STAGES PASSED BY THE MAGISTERIUM FROM VC II TO EG

In this section we take into consideration the itinerary, which is anything but straightforward, covered by the magisterium, from the conciliar period to the publication of *EG*, which enabled it to rediscover the special mission entrusted to the poor, for the benefit of the Christian community, as well as the ecclesial conditions in which they can carry it on.

### 2.1 THE PATH THAT LED TO EG'S THEOLOGY OF THE POOR

This process was initiated by *the radio message of 11 September 1962*, by John XXIII, the poor pope, in which he affirmed, 'For the underdeveloped countries, the church presents herself as she is, and wants to be, as the church of all, and especially the church of the Poor.'<sup>45</sup> The question of what a church of the poor could mean was kept alive in the council by several bishops: the bishop of Nazareth, G. Hakim, who particularly took the care of spreading among the other bishops the book, by P. Gauthier, *Les pauvres, Jésus et l'Église*,<sup>46</sup> C. M. Himmer, bishop of Tournai, who affirmed in the conciliar session of 4 December 1963 that in the church the first place must be given to the poor;<sup>47</sup> and especially the bishop of Bologna, G. Lercaro, to whom belongs the most significant conciliar intervention on the poor. On 6 December 1962, in the first session of the Council, he intervened in the debate on the constitution of the church stating, 'This is the hour of the poor, of the millions of poor who are on the whole earth, this is the hour of the mystery of the church, the mother of the poor, this is the hour of the mystery of Christ especially in the poor ... It is not about a [common] theme but, in a certain sense, the [only] theme of the whole Vatican II ... the theme of the Council is the church, as the church particularly of the poor.'<sup>48</sup> Despite these impulses, the theme of the church of the poor was not able to impose itself in the conciliar documents, even though it left a significant trace in an affirmation that we find in *Lumen Gentium (LG)* 8: 'Just as Christ carried out the work of redemption in poverty and persecution, so the church is called to follow the same route that she might communicate the fruits of salvation to men' (cf. also *Ad Gentes* 5). In any case, the Council had created the conditions for the theme to be brought to the attention of the whole church later on; a sign of it was the so-called Pact of the Catacombs, that is, the gesture placed, at the end of the Council, by a group of bishops, including Dom Hélder Câmara, by which they committed themselves to being servants

<sup>45</sup> JOHN XXIII. *Radiomessaggio del Santo Padre Giovanni XXIII ai fedeli di tutto il mondo*.

<sup>46</sup> GAUTHIER, P. *Les pauvres, Jésus et l'Église*. The book has its spiritual roots in the experience of the priest-workers in France.

<sup>47</sup> 'Primus locus in Ecclesia pauperibus reservandus est,' in CAPRILE, G. (ed.). *Concilio Vaticano II*. Vol. 3, p. 40.

<sup>48</sup> LERCARO, G. *Per la forza dello spirito*, p. 113-122.

of the poor—renouncing all claims to titles of grandeur and privilege, luxurious housing, material goods and personal bank accounts—and to promote justice and solidarity with the poor in their own dioceses.<sup>49</sup>

The seeds thrown by the Council flourished in an exceptional way in the second and third conferences of the Latin American episcopate, which were held respectively in Medellín in 1968 and Puebla in 1979. In the final document of Medellín, which deals extensively with the topic of the church's poverty (cf. *Medellín* 14), the church affirms that she wishes to present herself as 'authentically poor, missionary and paschal, free from each temporal power and courageously committed to the liberation of the whole person and all people' (*Medellín* 5,15a) but, in preferential way, of the poor (cf. *Medellín* 14,9). The final document of Puebla, by taking up again the theme of Medellín, of a poor church at the service of the integral liberation of the human being (cf. *Puebla* 697; 1156), makes explicit the moral principle of the preferential option for the poor for the first time in a clear way (cf. *Puebla* 1134-1165)<sup>50</sup>—which soon became a common heritage of the magisterium of the universal church<sup>51</sup>—and begins to deepen its theological bases by offering a series of statements on what we can consider the mission of the poor in the church. According to Puebla, in the poor it is possible to recognize the features of the suffering face of Christ which questions us and challenges us (cf. *Puebla* 31-40); sometimes the poor, even if confusedly, perceive the Kingdom of God with privileged force (cf. *Puebla* 132); Jesus Christ exerts his saving action starting from his presence 'in his church, especially among the poorest' (*Puebla* 330); the poor have an evangelising potential,<sup>52</sup> since they evangelize the church 'to the extent that they constantly question her, calling her to conversion,' and many of them bring into her life the evangelical values of solidarity, service, simplicity and willingness to welcome the gift of God (cf. *Puebla* 1147). It is interesting to note that, according to the bishops gathered in Puebla, at the origin of the discovery of the particular charism of the poor in the Christian community, from the third Latin American episcopal conference, there is the path taken by the church after Medellín, which was based on the commitment towards the poor and the oppressed, and the emergence of the base communities (cf. *Puebla* 1147). This recognition is important because it represents an indirect attestation of the value of ecclesial praxis for a renewed understanding of the gospel message.

Although not with the same development of views of Medellín and Puebla, in the same years the theme of the special vocation of the poor in the church appeared also in some documents of the universal church. First of all, we must say that the reflection of Medellín itself had already been encouraged by an allocution by Paul VI addressed to the peasants of San Jose de Mosquera, on 23 August 1968, near Bogota, where he affirmed, 'the whole tradition of the church recognizes the sacrament of Christ in the poor.'<sup>53</sup> Later on, in 1971, the Synod of Rome on *Justice in the World (JW)* returned to talk about a poor church (*JW*

<sup>49</sup> Cf. BEOZZO, J. O. *Pacto das Catacumbas*.

<sup>50</sup> According to *Puebla* 1134 the preferential option for the poor had already been expressed by the episcopal conference of Medellín whose document states that 'the Lord's particular mission to evangelize the poor must lead us to a distribution of efforts and apostolic staff that gives effective preference to the poorest and neediest sectors, and to those segregated for whatever reason' (*Medellín* 14.9). In reality, the preferential option for the poor is already formally present in *Gaudium et Spes (GS)* 1: 'The joys and the hopes, the griefs and the anxieties of the men of this age, especially those who are poor or in any way afflicted, these are the joys and hopes, the griefs and anxieties of the followers of Christ.' OROBATOR, A. *The Church as Family*, p. 159 points out that the preferential option for the poor indicates that the church is not yet poor. GUTIÉRREZ, G. *La verità vi farà liberi*, p. 225 observes that the expression of John XXIII, the church 'is, and wants to be' the church of the poor, presented already the choice to share the reality of the poor by the church as an ongoing process.

<sup>51</sup> In chronological order: *Sollicitudo rei socialis* 42; *Centesimus Annus* 11; *Tertio Millennio Adveniente* 51; *Novo Millennio Ineunte* 49 which, apropos of Mt 25:35-37, explicitly states that 'This gospel text is not a simple invitation to charity: it is a page of Christology which sheds a ray of light on the mystery of Christ;' (*Compendium of The Social Doctrine of The Church* 182).

<sup>52</sup> The debate has existed since 1977, cf. GALILEA, S. *Los pobres nos evangelizan*. GUTIÉRREZ, G. *La forza storica dei poveri*, p. 196 states that the church has discovered the evangelising potential of the poor thanks to the base communities after the Medellín conference.

<sup>53</sup> CENTRO ECCLESIALE ITALIANO PER L'AMERICA LATINA (ed.). *Medellín*, 257.

47-48) that sees ‘liberation from every oppressive state of affairs’ (*JW* 6) as an integral part of her mission to be carried out through the active participation of the poor (*JW* 77). Finally, in 1975, *Evangelii Nuntiandi* (*EN*) affirmed in passing that the poor ‘are often rich in faith and hope’ (*EN* 76) and through their popular piety it is possible to discover that they possess a very special thirst for God (*EN* 48). However, from this document up to *EG*, we must admit that the theme of the poor as a privileged place in which to listen to God in the Christian community continues to be of interest only in the Latin American church,<sup>54</sup> while it loses more and more importance in the documents of the universal church. To the best of our knowledge, the only subsequent texts of the magisterium of the universal church that can allude to a more theological than charitable vision of the relationship between the church and the poor are *Laborem Exercens* (1981), in which the expression ‘church of the poor’ occurs once (*Laborem Exercens* 8), and *Deus Caritas est* (2005) in which a saying of St. Lawrence, where the poor are regarded as ‘the treasure of the church,’ is quoted (*Deus Caritas est* 23). As for the documents issued by the continental episcopal conferences other than the Latin American one, they do not neglect the topic in question, but we cannot say that they give it adequate space. In the post-Synodal apostolic exhortation *Ecclesia in Asia* (1999) we find the significant expression ‘a church of the poor and for the poor’ (*Ecclesia in Asia* 34). In the post-Synodal apostolic exhortation *Ecclesia in Europa* (2003) there is an invitation to ‘be poor yourself and a friend to the poor’ (*Ecclesia in Europa* 105) but the context in which it is inserted reveals its exclusively charitable character. Even in the two apostolic exhortations that follow the two African synods, the approach to the reality of poverty remains exclusively of a moral character; in fact, both *Ecclesia in Africa* of 1995 (cf. *EA* 44), and *Africa Munus* of 2011 (cf. *Africa Munus* 2), limit themselves just to underlining the importance of the preferential option for the poor. Nevertheless, the former contains some more promising ideas: the necessity of justice first of all within the church herself with an examination of ‘the procedures, the possessions and the life style of the church’ (*EA* 106); the importance for the church to choose to ‘not seek advantages for herself’ (*EA* 139); and the consideration that her ‘most important resource, after the grace of Christ, is the people’ (*EA* 53), that, for the vast majority, is made up of poor persons.

## 2.2 THE KEY POINTS OF EG’S REFLECTION ON THE ROLE OF THE POOR IN THE CHURCH

Everything changes with *EG*, which incorporates the most important pronouncements of the magisterium on the poor, and highlights its implications, reaching conclusions that allow us to understand how the poor really constitute an important theological place.

The expression ‘the church of the poor’, launched by John XXIII, is turned into ‘a church which is poor and for the poor’ (*EG* 198). The teaching on the poor, constantly repeated by all the most important social documents of the magisterium, starting from the post-council time, that is, the preferential option for the poor, is now used as a discriminating criterion for evaluating the evangelization mission of the church—the proclamation of the gospel, without this option, risks being an ocean of words (*EG* 199). However, the most important fact is that the whole apostolic exhortation is littered with those theological motivations that support the prominent role played by the poor in the church, which the universal and Latin American magisterium had already fully drawn from both the Holy Scripture and the living Tradition. We can read, in order of appearance, the following statements: ‘The poor are the privileged recipients of the gospel, and the fact that it is freely preached to them is

<sup>54</sup> Cf. the documents of the subsequent Latin America episcopal conferences: *Santo Domingo* 95; 169; 178; and *Aparecida* 257; 398.



a sign of the kingdom that Jesus came to establish' (EG 48)<sup>55</sup>; 'The Christian substratum of certain peoples ... is a living reality. Here we find, especially among the most needy, a moral resource which preserves the values of an authentic Christian humanism' (EG 68); 'Popular piety manifests a thirst for God which only the poor and the simple can know' (EG 123, cf. EN 48); 'In their difficulties [the poor] know the suffering Christ' (EG 198); 'We need to let ourselves be evangelized by them' (EG 198); 'The new evangelization is an invitation to acknowledge the saving power at work in their lives and to put them at the centre of the church's pilgrim way' (EG 198); Jesus 'identifies especially with the little ones' (EG 209). On the basis of these theological considerations on the poor, Pope Francis can assert, 'We have to state, without mincing words, that there is an inseparable bond between our faith and the poor' (EG 48) and thus supports both 'the special place of the poor in God's people,' (EG, the title of paragraphs 197-2012) and the fact that 'the option for the poor is primarily a theological category' (EG 198). From all this, the most interesting development introduced by EG proceeds: a 'mysterious wisdom, which God wishes to share with us,' dwells in the poor (EG 198), for which we must ascribe to the poor a special magisterium—'They have much to teach us' (EG 198)<sup>56</sup>—which goes beyond the sheer fact that 'they share in the *sensus fidei*' (EG 198);<sup>57</sup> and this can only make of them an authentic *locus theologicus*. For Pope Francis, this magisterium of the poor does not take place by instituting a new ministry to be entrusted to them, perhaps with the task of producing authoritative documents, along the lines of the apostolic ministry, but within a certain way of relating to them, which those who in the church are not poor must establish. The Pope invites to consider the poor 'in a certain sense as one with ourselves' (EG 199),<sup>58</sup> to 'stop looking for those personal or communal niches which shelter us from the maelstrom of human misfortune and instead enter into the reality of other people's lives' (EG 270),<sup>59</sup> 'to abase' ourselves (EG 24), get our shoes 'soiled by the mud of the street'<sup>60</sup>, and 'touch the suffering flesh of others,' in order to assume 'the smell of the sheep' (EG 24). All this must occur in a context of interrelation. According to Pope Francis it is necessary to approach the poor with a contemplative gaze, because 'true love is always contemplative' (EG 199). By citing Thomas, he states that 'the love by which we find the other pleasing leads us to offer him or her something freely' (EG 199),<sup>61</sup> in this way we serve 'the other not out of necessity or vanity, but rather because he or she is beautiful above and beyond mere appearances' (EG 199). He affirms that 'what makes the authentic option for the poor differ from any other ideology, from any attempt to exploit the poor for one's own personal or political interest' (EG 199) is exactly the love that exceeds the attitude of 'grandees who look down upon them' (EG 271), and

<sup>55</sup> This acknowledgment has far-reaching consequences. To ensure that a message arrives correctly, that is to say understandable to the recipient, it is necessary that we carefully choose the channel and the appropriate code of communication, accepted and known just as well by the sender and the recipient. This gives important information for both the interpretation of the gospel message and the task of evangelizing.

<sup>56</sup> In all probability, Vincent de Paul was the first who spoke this way during a conversation with Louise de Marillac, in which he declared, 'My God! How beautiful it is to look at the poor when we consider them in God and with the esteem in which Christ holds them! ... [W]e recognize before God that they are our lords and our teachers' (ABBÉ PIERRE, PADRE PEDRO. *Per un mondo di giustizia e di pace*, p. 58). It seems that Vincent de Paul took the expression 'our lords and our teachers' from John of God, cf. GONZÁLEZ FAUS, J. I. *Vicari di Cristo*, p. 416.

<sup>57</sup> The words of Pope Francis, delivered during his visit to the Centro Astalli for refugees on 10 September 2013, can help to better understand this statement of EG: 'The poor are also the privileged teachers of our knowledge of God; their frailty and simplicity unmask our selfishness, our false security, our claim to be self-sufficient. The poor guide us to experience God's closeness and tenderness, to receive his love in our life, his mercy as the Father who cares for us, for all of us, with discretion and with patient trust' (FRANCIS. *Address of Holy Father Francis. Visit to the "Astalli Centre", the Jesuit Refugee Service in Rome*).

<sup>58</sup> He quotes Thomas Aquinas, *S. Th.*, II-II, q. 27, a. 2.

<sup>59</sup> EG 270 also reveals the Christological dimension of this movement; for the Pope, 'to touch human misery' means to approach 'the Lord's wounds' and 'know the power of tenderness.'

<sup>60</sup> This expression assumes all its significance especially if one lives her or his own ecclesial experience in slums, for example the slums of Nairobi where *matope*, that is mud, becomes an omnipresent and threatening reality for the dwellers especially during the rainy seasons.

<sup>61</sup> Thomas Aquinas, *S. Th.*, I-II, q. 110, a. 1; for the Pope, 'this entails appreciating the poor in their goodness, in their experience of life, in their culture, and in their ways of living the faith' (EG 199).

makes us able to ‘listen to them’ (*EG* 198)<sup>62</sup> and become ‘their friends.’ This friendship with the poor has nothing sentimental, the background is rather to be found in the gospel of John, since it is characterized by strongly Christological connotations. In fact, it leads ‘to find Christ in them’ (*EG* 198) not going beyond their person, as if the poor were just a means to reach Christ, but right through their person. For Pope Francis the achievement of this authentic communion not only ‘ensures that in every Christian community the poor feel at home’<sup>63</sup> (*EG* 199), but is also the necessary condition for responding to the call to become, as individuals and communities, ‘an instrument of God for the liberation and promotion of the poor’ (*EG* 187), or more exactly, to ‘accompany the poor in their path of liberation’ (*EG* 199);<sup>64</sup> in fact ‘the historic subject of this process is the people as a whole and their culture, and not a single class ... or elite’ (*EG* 239). In this way it is clearly stated that the relationship within which the poor exercise their magisterium in the Christian community is neither that characterized by the romanticism of those who live a pseudo-communion with them without engaging in their journey of liberation, nor that characterized by the paternalism of those who want to help them without recognizing their human dignity of being protagonists of their own history.

We can conclude the analysis of the contribution that *EG* offers in defining the special role that the poor play in the church by reporting a regret of Pope Francis. If, on the one hand, he expatiates on describing what the attitude of the ecclesial community should be towards the poor, on the other, he observes that often in reality they suffer, because of this same community, from ‘the worst discrimination,’ and that is, ‘the lack of spiritual care’ (*EG* 200). For the Pope, in order to recognize the value of popular piety (cf. *EG* 69)—whose importance lies in the fact that it represents the inculturation, the active appropriation, of the gospel accomplished by people through the action of the Spirit (cf. *EG* 122)—must not make us forget there is a popular piety that is not authentic and needs to be formed, that is, a ‘Christianity made up of devotions reflecting an individual and sentimental faith life.’ Now, in the face of this situation, there are some people who ‘promote these expressions while not being in the least concerned with the advancement of society or the formation of the laity, and in certain cases they do so in order to obtain economic benefits or some power over others’ (*EG* 70).

## CONCLUSION: THE ASTONISHING AFFINITY BETWEEN THE BIBLICAL AND MAGISTERIAL OUTCOME OF OUR ANALYSIS

If, at the end of our research, we compare the results of the analysis of the role that Sacred Scripture attributes to the poor in the history of salvation, with what *EG* dares to assert on the same subject, we discover that a surprising affinity between these two sources of revelation surfaces, with the sole difference that the magisterium of Pope Francis reaffirms the biblical datum taking into account the guilty amnesia or even the subtle manipulations that might characterize the attitude of all believers, especially pastors, towards the poor in today’s Christian communities. The surprising character of this affinity derives from

<sup>62</sup> Only after saying ‘to listen to them’ *EG* 198 adds ‘to speak for them’—it is necessary to really understand them before speaking in their favour. Pope Francis clearly thinks that the church that announces must be preceded by the church that listens.

<sup>63</sup> The perception sometimes one gets in Sub-Saharan Africa, when poor people perceive Christianity as something fascinating and yet foreign, suggests that this expression of the Pope also entails an invitation to a deeper inculturation of Christian life in the world of the poor (cf. *EG* 116; 122; 126; 129).

<sup>64</sup> The path of liberation of the poor to which the Pope refers concerns a liberation that goes beyond the economic and political spheres and implies the liberation of the rich as well. In fact, with personal accents, he states in *EG* 208, ‘If anyone feels offended by my words, I would respond that I speak them with affection ... quite apart from any ... political ideology ... I am interested only in helping those who are in thrall to an individualistic, indifferent and self-centred mentality to be freed from those unworthy chains and to attain a way of living and thinking which is more humane.’

the fact that the reflection of the magisterium on the centrality of the poor in the saving revelation of God suffered an overall setback already towards the end of the 70s, therefore it was not easy to expect the magisterium to provide so thorough a treatment of the topic. In reality, if Pope Francis could not count on a more insightful teaching of the previous magisterium on the matter, nevertheless he could rely on the development of theology, which instead had succeeded in discovering, in the meantime, the strength with which the Sacred Scripture reserves a privileged place for the poor in the Christian mystery. In a future article we will deal with this path of theology, its major achievements—which are put forward in all their profound implications precisely by *EG*—and further possible developments of the understanding of the Christian faith that the theological place of the poor favours.

## REFERENCES

- ABBÉ PIERRE; PADRE PEDRO. *Per un mondo di giustizia e di pace*. Edited by FACÉRIAS, Anne and Daniel. Milano: Jaca Book, 2005.
- BARBAGLIO, Giuseppe. *Le lettere di Paolo*. Roma: Borla, 1990. v. 1.
- BEOZZO, José Oscar. *Pacto das Catacumbas: Por Uma Igreja Servidora e Pobre*. São Paulo: Paulinas, 2015. <https://doi.org/10.19176/rct.i87.28575>
- CAPRILE, Giovanni (ed.). *Concilio Vaticano II*. Roma: La Civiltà Cattolica, 1965-1969. v. 3.
- CASTILLO, José Maria. *I poveri e la teologia*. Assisi: Cittadella Editrice, 2002.
- CASTILLO, José Maria. *Simboli di libertà*. Assisi: Cittadella Editrice, 1983.
- CENTRO ECCLESIALE ITALIANO PER L'AMERICA LATINA (ed.). *Medellin: Documenti della seconda conferenza dell'episcopato latino americano*. Bologna: EMI, 1977.
- CONGAR, Yves. Les biens temporels de l'Eglise d'après sa tradition théologique et canonique. In: CONGAR, Yves; COTTIER, Georges; CHENU, Marie-Dominique (ed.). *Eglise et pauvreté*. Paris: Les Editions du Cerf, 1965. p. 233-258. <https://doi.org/10.7202/037950ar>
- CONGAR, Yves. *Per una teologia del laicato*. Brescia: Morcelliana, 1966.
- CREDIT SUISSE. *Global Wealth Report 2018*. Zurich: Credit Suisse Research Institute, 2018.
- CROSSAN, John Dominic (ed.). *Saying parallels: a Workbook for the Jesus Tradition*. Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1986.
- CUSMANO, Giacomo. Predica tenuta nella IV Domenica di Quaresima del 1884. In: *Liturgia delle Ore – Ufficio delle Letture* (14 Marzo). Available at: <http://www.cdl.diocesipa.it/Calendario%20Diocesano/UfficioLettureBeatoGiacomoCusmano.htm>. Accessed: 17 Dec. 2018.
- DUPONT, Jacques. Gesù Messia dei poveri, Messia povero. In: DUPONT, Jacques;
- HAMMAN, Adalbert-Gautier; MICCOLI, Giovanni (ed.). *Seguire Gesù povero*. Magnano: Comunità di Bose, 1984. p. 7-87.
- ELLACURÍA, Ignacio. *Conversione della Chiesa al Regno di Dio*. Brescia: Editrice Queriniana, 1992.
- FABRIS, Rinaldo. *Matteo: traduzione e commento*. Roma: Borla, 1982.
- FAO; IFAD; UNICEF; WFP; WHO. *The State of Food Security and Nutrition in the World 2018*. Rome: FAO, 2018.

- FRANCIS, Pope. *Address of Holy Father Francis*. Visit to the “Astalli Centre”, the Jesuit Refugee Service in Rome, 10 Sep. 2013. Available at: [https://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2013/september/documents/papa-francesco\\_20130910\\_centro-astalli.html](https://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2013/september/documents/papa-francesco_20130910_centro-astalli.html). Accessed: 17 Dec. 2018.
- FRIESEN, Steven J. *Injustice or God’s Will? Early Christian Explanations of Poverty*. In:
- HOLMAN, Susan R. *Wealth and Poverty in Early Church and Society*. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008, p. 17-36
- GALILEA, Segundo. *Los pobres nos evangelizan*. Bogotá: Indo-American Press Service, 1977.
- GAUTHIER, Paul. *Les pauvres, Jésus et l’Église*. Paris: Editions Universitaires, 1962.
- GONZÁLEZ FAUS, José Ignacio. *Vicari di Cristo*. Bologna: Dehoniane, 1995.
- GUTIÉRREZ, Gustavo; MÜLLER Ludwig. *On the Side of the Poor*. New York: Orbis Books, 2015. Kindle.
- GUTIÉRREZ, Gustavo. *La forza storica dei poveri*. Brescia: Queriniana, 1981.
- GUTIÉRREZ, Gustavo. *La verità vi farà liberi*. Brescia: Queriniana, 1990.
- HAUCK, F.; BAMMEL, E. πτωχός. In: KITTEL, Gerhard; GRIEDRICH, Gerhard (ed.). *Grande Lessico del Nuovo Testamento*. Brescia: Paideia, 1977, cols. 709-788. Vol. XI.
- INTERNATIONAL ECUMENICAL CONGRESS OF THEOLOGY. *La irrupción de los pobres en la Iglesia: Documentos del Congreso Internacional Ecueménico de Teología, São Paulo, Brasil (20 Feb. to 2 Mar. 1980)*. San José, Costa Rica: Departamento Ecueménico de Investigaciones, 1980. Available at: <https://archive.org/details/lairrupciondelos00inte>. Accessed: 17 Dec. 2018. <https://doi.org/10.36576/summa.1961>
- JOHN XXIII, Pope. Radiomessaggio del Santo Padre Giovanni XXIII ai fedeli di tutto il mondo, a un mese dal Concilio Ecumenico Vaticano II, 11 Sep. 1962. Available at: [http://w2.vatican.va/content/john-xxiii/it/speeches/1962/documents/hf\\_j-xxiii\\_spe\\_19620911\\_ecumenical-council.html](http://w2.vatican.va/content/john-xxiii/it/speeches/1962/documents/hf_j-xxiii_spe_19620911_ecumenical-council.html). Accessed: 15 Dec. 2018. <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctt21pxmv0.5>
- LERCARO, Giacomo. *Per la forza dello spirito: discorsi conciliari del Card. Giacomo Lercaro*. Edited by ISTITUTO PER LE SCIENZE RELIGIOSE. Bologna: EDB, 1984. <https://doi.org/10.2307/3166867>
- MAGGI, Alberto. *Padre dei Poveri*. Assisi: Cittadella Editrice, 2008.
- MORMANDO, Franco. *Nudus nudum Christum sequi: The Franciscans and Differing Interpretations of Male Nakedness in Fifteenth-Century Italy*. In: DUBRUCK, Edelgard E.;
- GUSICK, Barbara I. *Fifteenth-Century Studies*. New York: Camden House, 2008. p. 171-197. Vol. 33.
- OROBATOR, Agbonkhianmeghe E. *The Church as Family: African Ecclesiology in Its Social Context*. Nairobi: Pauline Publications Africa, 2000.
- PEET, Richard. *Unholy Trinity: The IMF, World Bank and WTO*. London: Zed Book, 2003. <https://doi.org/10.1177/03098168100340031106>
- SOBRINO, Jon. *Gesù Cristo liberatore*. Assisi: Cittadella Editrice, 1995.
- TORRELL, Jean-Pierre. *La Teologia cattolica*. Milano: Jaca Book, 1998.
- WICKS, Jared. *Luoghi Teologici*. In: LATOURELLE, René; FISICHELLA, Rino (ed.). *Dizionario di Teologia Fondamentale*. Cittadella Editrice: Assisi, 1990. p. 645-647.
- WORLD BANK. *Poverty and Shared Prosperity 2018: Piecing Together the Poverty Puzzle*. Washington, DC: World Bank, 2018. <https://doi.org/10.1596/978-1-4648-1330-6>

Recebido: 06/06/2019  
Aprovado: 23/09/2019  
Publicado: 29/12/2019

**Endereço para correspondência:**

Ettore Marangi  
St. Francis of Assisi Friary  
Donyo Sabuk Avenue 41  
P.O. BOX 612-00606  
Sarit Centre  
Nairobi, Kenya.