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Environmental Policy Choices: The Importance of the Preferential Option for the Poor in *Laudato si'*

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The November/December 2015 issue of *Environment* contained an editorial and eight invited reflections on the encyclical *Laudato si'* by a variety of scholars, which might make further commentary seem superfluous. After reading the issue with great interest, I realized that one of the most germane points in Catholic social thought for environmental scientists and policymakers was never highlighted.

I refer to the preferential option for the poor, synonymously the option for the poor. It is not surprising with commentators trying to describe the importance of such an extensive and rich document that not everything was included, but I feel this point deserves special mention. As a scientist directing an environmental studies department at a Catholic university for 20 years I have found the preferential option for the poor to be one of the unique contributions (along with the dignity of the human person and the common good) that the Catholic intellectual tradition makes to environmental policy decisions.¹ When a policy decision requires the adjudication of conflicting claims between recognizable groups of people (e.g., the needs of industrial water users and the health of Native Americans²), the preferential option for the poor provides a tool for guiding difficult policy decisions. In brief, in such adjudication the voice of the poorest should be given preference in a measure of restorative justice.³

Poverty and equity were mentioned in the November/December issue a number of times. The “social mortgage” and “poverty alleviation” were mentioned (by O’Riordan et al.), we encountered the fact that “climate” is mentioned once and “the poor” 59 times in the encyclical (Hulme), and we heard that the church has been a “strong advocate of the poor” (Jamieson). We also heard that the “poor and marginalized” would benefit most from improvements in the U.S. energy supply (Stinson) and that “the poor must be cared for as they are the most adversely affected by climate change” (Tucker). A mention even occurred where we heard that liberation theology was “a moral reaction to social injustice and poverty ... Interpreting God as having a preference for people who are powerless and dispossessed” (Lahsen and Domingues).

However, what matters most about the preferential option for the poor for environmental scientists and policymakers is not the theological concept that God has a preference for the poor, powerless, and dispossessed, but that this gives policymakers a practical yardstick to make and justify difficult decisions. Pope Francis’s treatment of the preferential option for the poor in *Laudato si'* is explicit and powerful. He wrote:

158. In the present condition of global society, where injustices abound and growing numbers of people are deprived of basic human rights and considered expendable, the principle of the common good immediately becomes, logically and inevitably, a summons to solidarity and a preferential option for the poorest of our brothers and sisters. This option entails recognizing the implications of the universal destination of the world's goods ... it demands before all else an appreciation of the immense dignity of the poor ... today, this option is in fact an ethical imperative essential for effectively attaining the common good.

Does anything special or different come from this emphasis for environmental and social policy? I believe that it does. It was mentioned by more than one writer (O'Riordan et al., Stinson) that Pope Francis convened a Vatican meeting of mayors to discuss *Laudato si'*, and afterward the University of Portland in Portland, Oregon, hosted a city leadership meeting for Mayor Hales to discuss the relationship between the ideas in *Laudato si'* and Portland's city's policies. I think that it was no coincidence that the first large policy initiative coming from Mayor Hales after his Vatican meeting was an emergency declaration marking a significant new city effort to solve the problem of homelessness in Portland.⁴ There are more demands on Portland's city coffers, as for all cities, than resources to simultaneously meet them. As *Laudato si'* says in what is essentially a longer section on transportation, buildings, and other aspects of urban planning:

152 ... Lack of housing is a grave problem in many parts of the world, both in rural areas and in large cities ... Not only the poor, but many other members of society as well, find it difficult to own a home. Having a home has much to do with a sense of personal dignity.

In allocating resources, housing for the poorest of Portland's poor has come to the fore. The concept of the preferential option for the poor provides a tool by which such decisions can be measured.

The preferential option for the poor goes beyond prioritizing resource allocations in a city. It implies restorative international action, of the sort we will need to combat global climate change, as *Laudato si'* says:

51 ... A true "ecological debt" exists, particularly between the global north and south. The encyclical also demands a special sensitivity for indigenous ways of life:

146 ... In this sense, it is essential to show special care for indigenous communities and their cultural traditions. They are not merely one minority among others, but should be the principal dialogue partners, especially when large projects affecting their land are proposed.

This gives us new ways to think about policy decisions relating to things like indigenous peoples' right to water (Gerlak and Wilder, *Environment*, March/April 2012), or socially inclusive

sustainable growth in Africa (Munang and Mgende, Environment, May/June 2015) or many other topics too numerous to mention here.

The encyclical also extends the preferential option for the poor to thinking across time. As it says:

162 ... Furthermore, our inability to think seriously about future generations is linked to our inability to broaden the scope of our present interests and to give consideration to those who remain excluded from development. Let us not only keep the poor of the future in mind, but also today's poor, whose life on this earth is brief and who cannot keep on waiting.⁵

Will *Laudato si'* become as important as Our Common Future or Silent Spring or Limits to Growth or other comparisons being made (O'Riordan et al., Jamieson)? I believe that it will and that part of its lasting value will be the utility to policymakers of the preferential option for the poor, which it raises to a new visibility and which provides a unique tool for environmental decision making.

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NOTES

1. For an example of the use of the dignity of the human person in considering policy related to anthropogenic environmental toxins, see Russell A. Butkus and Steven A. Kolmes, "Anthropogenic Environmental Toxins and Children's Health: Children's Right to a Toxic Free Environment in Light of Catholic Social Teaching," *Journal of Catholic Social Thought* 7 (2010): 83–114. For an example of the use of the common good in discussing sustainability see Russell A. Butkus and Steven A. Kolmes, "Ecology and the Common Good: Sustainability and Catholic Social Teaching," *Journal of Catholic Social Thought* 4 (2007): 403–436.
2. Steven A. Kolmes and Russell A. Butkus, "Water Quality Standards: A Scientific and Theological-Ethical Analysis," *Environment: Science and Policy for Sustainable Development* 54, no. 6 (2012): 17–28.
3. For a discussion of the origins of the preferential option for the poor in liberation theology and its relationship to social analysis and praxis, see Russell A. Butkus and Steven A. Kolmes, *Environmental Science and Theology in Dialogue* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Press, 2011), 16–18, 42–46.
4. See http://www.oregonlive.com/portland/index.ssf/2015/10/portland_approves_housing_emer.html (accessed December 2, 2015).

5. For a discussion of how social feedback loops acting over time matter to planning for climate change impacts on vulnerable populations, see Kolmes (Environment, March/April 2008).