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STUDENTS DECLARATION

I hereby declare that the material used herein has not been submitted for Academic Credit to any other Institution: All sources have been cited in full.

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INTRODUCTION

"Option for the poor" seems to be of a great importance in today's world. Much have been written on this topic in recent times. With the blossoming of the Liberation theology, "option for the poor" became also the central theme of the interest of many theologians. This paper does not go in the line of the Liberation Theology thought, but in this paper I would rather try to find out what is the meaning and understanding of the "option for the poor" presented to us in the Bible.

Yet, I do not intend to show the overview of the option of the poor in the History of Salvation but rather I will concentrate on the meaning of Jesus' proclamation of the "good new to the poor" presented to us in the beginning of his ministry, in the key text from Luke 4:18-21, which includes a quotation from the Book of Isaiah, chapter 61. But in order to understand well the meaning of the option taken by Jesus we ought to refer briefly to the Old Testament notion of the "option for the poor of Yahweh," because Jesus is the One to bring about fulfilment of the promises of the Old Testament. I will start from the first encounter by Israel option for the poor undertaken by God in Egypt and then its understanding in the prophets, mainly in Isaiah to whom Jesus recalls.

I. Good News to the Poor.

When Jesus of Nazareth began his public ministry he proclaimed the "good news." In the two key texts in the synoptic gospels this message is called a "gospel for the poor":

1) Luke in chapter four introduces us to Jesus' ministry with the scene in the synagogue at Nazareth, where Jesus reads from the book of Isaiah:

"The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to preach release to captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed, to proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord" (Is. 61:1; 58:6) and Jesus adds: "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing." (Lk 4:18-21).

Here it is also clear that when Jesus proclaims good news for the poor it is not something new, but only the definitive and eschatologically effective proclamation of the arrival, now beginning, of this thing that has long existed as promise.¹

Jesus comments on this text and points at the fulfilment of these words: "today". Option for the poor reaches its true meaning and realisation in Jesus.

2). Matt. 11:4-6 and Luke 7:22-23 give us an account of the meeting of the disciples of John the Baptizer with Jesus. They asked him a question: "Are you the one who is to come?" Jesus answered quoting Isaiah:

"The blind receive their sight and the lame walk, lepers are cleansed and the deaf hear, and the dead are raised up, and the poor have good news preached to them." (Is. 29:18-19, 35: 5-6, 42: 18, 61:1-2).

Reading those passages we ought to ask ourselves a few questions:

- 1) What did it really mean when Jesus designated the gospel as "gospel for the poor?"
- 2) Who are these poor to whom Jesus' gospel is directed?
- 3) What is that option for the poor?

But we cannot answer these questions or understand correctly the saying about a "gospel" for the poor unless we recognise it as an allusion to Old Testament

¹ Norbert Lohfink, Option for the Poor, (Berkeley, 1987), p.57.

texts that would have echoed in the minds of Jesus and his contemporaries when the key word was mentioned, because the formulation itself does not originate with Jesus, but as we have seen, it comes from Isaiah. In fact, to understand truly the meaning of the option for the poor in the New Testament we ought to consult, in fact, the whole Old Testament "option for the poor" on which even Isaiah builds. Jesus in his ministry brings to fulfilment all the promises given to Israel and in God's plan since the creation.

So, let us have a closer look at the problems in the Old Testament which are of some interest to our theme.

II. EXODUS as a PROTOTYPE of the OPTION for the POOR.

In the Old Testament we come across two kinds of the option for the poor:

- A. The first one is common to all societies of Ancient Near East and to the Bible.
- B. The second one is something that is distinct to the Bible and proper to Yahweh as described in the Exodus story. Let us look on them separately:

A. The first kind of option was built on different social laws to help the poor.

1. Ancient Near East.

a) Wisdom literature

In the countries of Ancient Near East like Egypt and Mesopotamia it was part of the education of the people to help the poor and especially widows and orphans: cf. Instruction of Meri-ka-re, Ani, Instruction of Amen-em-opet, Book of the Dead.²

b) The obligation of the King

The king acting as judge and lawgiver: his main task was to help the weak and the poor. A classical example is the Code of Hammurabi.³

c) Love of the gods for the poor

It was common a conviction that the gods themselves, particularly the sun-god, have a special love for the poor, as in the Akkadian "Counsels of Wisdom"⁴.

d) Men before the gods: spirituality

The gods liked the poor and helped them—it was worthwhile to be the "poor in spirit" for gods: Poor's man Stele⁵, Novel of Setna.

² *ibid.*, p.17.

³ Norbert Lohfink, "Poverty in the Laws of the Ancient Near East and of the Bible", Theological Studies, (52,1991), p.36.

⁴ Norbert Lohfink, Option for the Poor (Berkeley, 1987), p.20.

⁵ Theological Studies, (52, 1991), p.37.

However, the option of Ancient Near East countries for the poor had its limits⁶.

To mention some:

- the dissonance between theory and practice
- the ethics and all the order which was to help care for the poor mostly and primarily meant to be a "stabilising system"⁷ of the social order which in fact produced poverty. The rich, in order to continue getting profit, were supposed to take care of the poor.

The paradox was that the gods who care for the poor, "were the same gods who guaranteed the eternal survival of the social structures"⁸ which produced poverty.

2. Old Testament.

In the Old Testament we come across similar formulations concerning care for the poor in society, although the will of God for Israel was that "There will be no poor among you" (Dt. 15:4). However, it is not surprising that their option for the poor had a common root with the other nations' view, because they rejected "God's option". A New Society of brothers and sisters instead of being a model to other nations became like them.

Scripture reflects some attempts at least to minimize that poverty or help the poor, because in reality: "the poor will never cease out of the land" (Dt. 15:11)

To take care of the poor, as in the Ancient Near East, was in the Old Testament considered as part of:

a) education: Pr.14:31, Job. 29:22-25, Ps. 41:2, Is. 58:6-16.

b) duty of the king: Jer. 22:13-19, Ps72, Amos 2:6-8, Is. 11:3-5—Messiah-king will create justice for the poor.⁹

c) God is seen as the helper of the poor. He defends and care for them and especially for the orphan and widow: Pr. 22:22-23, Job 5:15-16, Dt. 10:17-19, Ps. 10.

⁶ *ibid.* p. 37.

⁷ Norbert Lohfink, Option for the Poor (Berkeley, 1987), p.30.

⁸ *ibid.*, p.29.

⁹ *ibid.*, p.22.

d) *spirituality of the poor*: Jer. 20:11-13, those who pray the Psalms refer to themselves before God as the poor, the “anawim.”¹⁰

So, as we have seen the option for the poor “is not in any way exclusively biblical and is therefore not specifically Christian”,¹¹ but well known already in the Ancient Near East.

What made option for the poor in Israel distinct from other nations, in the Old Testament, was Yahweh’s option for the poor as experienced by Israel in Egypt and entrusted to Israel by Yahweh as a foundation of a new and just society, exemplary to others, where there will be no poor any more.

B. Yahweh’s option for the poor.

The second kind of option: Yahweh’s concern for the poor, is unique and mysterious. What other laws were proposing as a solution to poverty, outside of Israel, “first found their full development in Israel itself”.¹² But Yahweh had something more to say. Israel’s credo, Dt. 26:5-9, is a key text to understand the meaning of the Exodus story in which we encounter Yahweh’s option for the poor as distinctive. Let us analyse it in order to get clear the true meaning of the option taken by Yahweh:

“A wandering Aramean was my father; and he went down into Egypt and sojourned there, few in number; and there he became a nation, great, mighty, and populous. And the Egyptians treated us harshly, and afflicted us, and laid upon us hard bondage. Then we cried to the Lord the God of our fathers, and the Lord heard our voice, and saw our affliction, our toil, and our oppression; and the Lord brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand and outstretched arm, with great terror, with signs and wonders; and he brought us into this place and gave us this land, a land flowing with milk and honey”.

a) *‘nation from the midst of another nation’* (Dt. 4:34 cf. 26:5).

God’s act of liberation focuses on a very large and inclusive group within Egypt which is recognised as a group of poor and oppressed people—Hebrews =

¹⁰ *ibid.*, p.22.

¹¹ *ibid.*, p.23.

¹² *ibid.*, p.23.

the Egyptian lower class, as Child suggests,¹³ economically exploited and socially marginalized.

b) *'come, let us deal shrewdly with them (...), they set taskmasters over them to afflict them with heavy burdens'* (Ex. 1:9ff cf. Dt. 26:6).

Poverty as the result of economic exploitation and social degradation is clearly recognised as the product of human action. It is neither fate, nor the will of the gods, nor it is deserved because of personal fault. Pharaoh is a figure of the social system who willed it and affected it.

c) *'Then we cried to the Lord... and the Lord heard our voice..., and the Lord brought us out of Egypt...'* (Dt. 26: 7-8).

The Book of Exodus gives us accounts of a series of attempts to aid the exploited Hebrews, which can be seen as the act of human option for the poor inside oppressive structures:

- midwives, who were ordered to kill every first born male Jew (Ex 1:15-22), spared them—poor can help poor but they have to be liars.
- princess, who saved Hebrew male child, Moses (Ex.1:22-2:10), performed an individual act of charity
- counter-terror (Ex 2:11-22) undertaken by Moses, who acts as a terrorist to protect the poor Hebrews. As a result he had to flee from Egypt because the system was too powerful and such actions usually turned against the poor.
- reformist phase (Ex 5:1-23), negotiation with Pharaoh, in order to achieve an amelioration of the conditions of the oppressed people within the system, appears counterproductive and makes the situation even worse, because they were burden with heavier tasks.
- self-destruction (Ex 7:1-11:10), the account of the plagues brings across the message that the Egyptian system, which despises and exploits people, is creating for itself "a self-destructive and fatal sphere of action that in the end will drag both the people and nature itself into the pit".¹⁴

¹³ Brevard Childs, *Introduction to the Old Testament as Scripture*, (Philadelphia, 1982), p.468.

¹⁴ Norbet Lohfink, *Option for the Poor*, (Berkeley, 1987), p.42.

Any human attempts, to solve the problem of poverty or to help the poor, are only partial and fail; only God has a solution to the problem.

- EXODUS = God leads people out of the system!!! "God transplants them into another country".¹⁵ "Exodus is a creation of a people out of the nothingness of slavery"¹⁶

Yahweh's intervention does not aim to lighten the sufferings of his people, as were some other acts of assistance in Ancient Near East. Yahweh does not look for compromise or solutions in an existing society of oppression. He takes the unexpected option of taking the poor out of the corrupted society and creating a new society without poor. "It was an Exodus from a condition of slavery for a new life in brotherhood and justice"¹⁷

This is an act of New Creation undertaken by Yahweh and symbolised in the division of the waters of the Red Sea.

d) 'with signs and wonders' (Dt 26:8).

The Exodus is a miraculous event. The removal of the poor from the system that enslaves them is the work of Yahweh alone. "The Exodus is so appalling that even the victims of the system who are thereby to be set free cannot conceive or accept it."¹⁸ Only God knows its purpose: Ex 16:3; 17:3; Num 11:1; 14:4-6; 20:3-5; 21:5; Dt 9:7-8; 22-24. Grumbling in the wilderness (Ex 14:10-12) and Homesickness for Egypt are proof for it.

e) 'land flowing with milk and honey' (Dt 26:9).

"The land flows with milk and honey as food for human beings there, where they live in the society intended by God from the time of creation"¹⁹

The departure from the impoverished society could not be a genuine removal unless it led to the constitution of "a new society that knows no more poverty".²⁰

¹⁵ *ibid.*, p.42.

¹⁶ Juan Alfaro, "God Protects and Liberates the Poor", *Concilium*, (187, 1996), p.28.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p.28.

¹⁸ Norbert Lohfink, *Option for the Poor*, (Berkeley, 1987), p.42.

¹⁹ *ibid.*, p.44.

f) 'What great nation is there that has statutes and ordinances so righteous as all this law (...)?' (Dt 4:6)

"The Covenantal Code given at Mount Sinai is a kind of blueprint for God's projected society"²¹ The Notion of the New Creation, New Society introduces us into a New Age where there will be no more slavery, no more poverty, and leads to the New Law, which will shape this New Society, in order that they would not reproduce the same kind of system as in Egypt.

According to the Bible the poor of Egypt are to become, through the Exodus, a kind of contrast-society, with just laws and ordinances—as a sign of the "otherness of Israel". They all referred to the situation in Egypt: "You shall not exploit a stranger for you were strangers in the land of Egypt" (Ex 23:9). They introduced laws ruling social, and economic life (Ex. 22, Dt. 15, Dt. 26, Lev. 19), and the idea of a sabbatical year, so as to make sure that, in any case, even if the poor will appear because of different circumstances, there will be always for them a chance to start anew. "The debts were to be cancelled and the fruits of the land were reserved for the poor" (Ex 23:10-11).²²

Israel was aware that it would never be possible to eliminate the existence of strangers, orphans and widows. But it was possible, according to Deuteronomy, to create a world in which one can be a stranger, an orphan or a widow without being poor.

According to the order proposed in Deuteronomy Yahweh intends that Israel be a nation of sisters and brothers (Dt. 15:2-4) in which there would be no more poor. "Even the enemies were to be loved and foreigners were to be treated as neighbours and brothers. (cf. Ex. 22:20, 13:9, Lev. 19:33)"²³

g) *The new contrast-society* was to be different not only from that of Egypt but from all other existing societies. Israel finally embodied what all human societies longed for and strove for but never attained by human efforts—"You shall keep

²⁰ *ibid.*, p.43.

²¹ *ibid.*, p.43.

²² *Concilium*, (187, 1986), p.33.

²³ *ibid.*, p.32.

the statutes and ordinances for that will be your wisdom and your understanding, which the nations seek" (Dt. 4:6).

Israel as "special possession" of Yahweh, "kingdom of Priests", "Holy nation" is entrusted by Yahweh with a mission to the other nations as the example of ideal society, just laws, sign of mediation to the other nations (cf. Ex. 19:5-6).

To sum up Israel's credo, Dt. 26:5-9, we can point out that:

- Yahweh's option for the poor was unique and counter to human efforts.
- "The goal of Exodus was the perfect brotherhood and freedom among Israelites which through the gift of land would result in the elimination of all oppression, injustice and poverty" ²⁴
- Yahweh's intention was that "Israel be a nation of sisters and brothers in: 'There will be no poor among you' (Dt. 15:4), a kind of divinely-willed contrast-society." ²⁵

But what followed was infidelity to Yahweh's will and Israel created laws to help the poor: "If there is among you a poor man, one of your brethren..." (Dt. 15:7).

"The Israelites would always find a challenge for charity and generosity through or duty towards the poor." ²⁶

To what extent Israel's beginning as a contrast-society was maintained and developed in its later history we shall see in the next section.

²⁴ *ibid.*, p.33.

²⁵ Norbet Lohfink, Option for the Poor, (Berkeley, 1987), p.45.

²⁶ Concilium, (187, 1986), p.33.

III. PROPHETS.

The prophets regarded the Exodus as the birth of the people of the covenant (cf. Ez 16:4-7) and therefore as the event in which Yahweh claims his fatherhood over Israel (cf. Hos. 11, Jer. 31, Is. 63). The great events of the Exodus become in the prophets the reality against which they judge the present ingratitude, rebellion and infidelity of Israel. In spite of all the things Yahweh has done for his people, they have abandoned Him and betrayed His covenant (cf. Am. 2:9, Mic. 6:3, Hos. 12:13). In consequence "the image of the perfect society proposed at the beginning of Exodus was repeatedly betrayed by Israel."²⁷

The problem of poverty and the poor in Israel continued to appear again and again. Israel as a monarchy become more and more like other nations, and the social structures more and more of a pyramid: rich and poor, high and low classes in the society. What we find in the Bible is the option undertaken, as in the Ancient Near East, in order to reduce or lighten the poverty. But this was far from the will of God expressed in Exodus. So as we have seen earlier, their option does not differ much from that of other nations.

That is why the social criticism of the prophets, the sayings of the wisdom teachers in the schools and the prayers we find in the Psalter show great similarity to the statements on poverty in the rest of the Ancient Near East. On the basis of the Exodus that should never have been the case, and fidelity to that option undertaken by Yahweh was to make them different from other nation.

"For the demand made explicit in the Exodus credo was still valid, and an Israel that had poor people in its midst, and that therefore had to formulate an ethic of concern for the poor, could really be red-faced with shame"²⁸

It was simply unacceptable that there should be poor people in Israel (cf. Dt. 15:4).

In considering the exact meaning of the words "gospel for the poor", we will have to take up this discrepancy between Israel's beginning as reflected in its

²⁷ *ibid.*, p.50.

²⁸ *ibid.*, p.56.

Credo and its often so sorry reality.²⁹ "For the poor will never cease out of the land" (Dt. 15:11). Israel, now poor, would not be poor if they had listened to Yahweh and to his commandments. Yahweh hoped in them and wanted them to be His instrument, but the Chosen People disappointed Him. In spite of this, He still loves them; because "they are marked with his indelible sign."³⁰

The Prophets tried to bring back Israel to the will of Yahweh by pointing out their mistakes, social injustice (Amos), lack of faithfulness to the covenant (Hosea). They underlined the need for continuous conversion. Babylonian Exile was interpreted by them as punishment for the sins of Israel and especially the social and moral corruption brought about by economic prosperity, as Isaiah points out in chapter 5. The Law was a sacrament of liberation, freedom for the Israelites, but if they lost the ideals of the Covenant they had to go into captivity. Infidelity can only be cured by returning the nation to captivity, which is symbolised by Egypt (Am. 4, Hos. 2). This judgement of Yahweh will bring about the ruin of the nation and the exile, but only for a time, for Yahweh is faithful to his covenant and cannot abandon his people.

Prophets of Israel speak about "remnant" theme as the designation of the faithful ones, who stick to the Law, and who will be saved and with whom after the judgement, Yahweh will make a new beginning (cf. Is.10:20-23, Is. 27: 1-13).

1. Prophet Zephaniah.

The Prophet Zephaniah is the first to name this remnant the "Poor". Concern for the poor appears in Zephaniah as a future hope of Israel. But it is not matter of all the world's poor, but of those children of Israel who are again as they were at the beginning of their history; poor and exploited.

The message of Zephaniah:

- The Day of Yahweh will come upon the whole of creation, but especially Jerusalem and Judah. Only the "poor of the land" who keep the commandments of Yahweh perhaps will be saved (Zeph. 1:2-2:3).

²⁹ *ibid.*, p.50.

³⁰ *ibid.*, p.68.

- Yahweh has already begun the destruction of the nations, but Jerusalem is still given a chance if they see what is happening and repent. But even this last chance is missed by Israel (Zeph. 2:4 - 3:7).
- Yahweh, instead of destroying the nations, performs the miracle of their conversion. Finally, Yahweh will also take away the shame from Jerusalem. The newly restored Jerusalem will be a "Jerusalem of the poor" (Zeph. 3:8-15).
- The day of Yahweh will thus, in the end, be salvation and not destruction. Yahweh will cause his salvation to bypass his original chosen people and begin in the pagan world. He will then lead these nations in a pilgrimage to Jerusalem. And then, in this context, salvation will return to Jerusalem. New Testament will show the fulfilment of this prophetic message in the rejection of salvation by Israel and openness to the gentile mission.

These motives presented by the prophet Zephaniah were available to Deuteron-Isaiah.

2. "The Gospel for the Poor" in Deuteron-Isaiah.

Deuteron-Isaiah is the one who first uses the word "gospel". He does not speak of the poor in Israel—"remnant", but rather of all Israel (those in Exile and those who remained in Judah and Jerusalem) as the poor of Yahweh. The "poor of Yahweh" are no longer just any poor people, they are the people of God who have been thrust into misery by other nations. These nations acted as God's instrument of punishment but overstepped their duty and treated Israel unjustly. "In Deuteron-Isaiah, as already in Zephaniah, the whole world's system appears as a single structure of abasement and oppression".³¹ Israel has become the nation of the poor of Yahweh—a suffering people whom God once more joins to himself in solidarity. As time passed, the prophets began to see the Exile in a different light: not anymore as a punishment for the sins of Israel, but in terms of the Suffering Servant of Yahweh. Israel was understood in a collective reading of the "persona" of the Servant of God³² who suffers persecutions and does not resist,

³¹ *ibid.*, p.68.

³² *ibid.*, p.68.

but gives his back to the smiters (Is 50:4-6). Although innocent they are oppressed by other nations because of their uniqueness. They are unique because, they are marked by Yahweh as His own.

The Old Exodus, at the beginning of Israel's history, is mirrored in a New Exodus, coming back from Exile (Is 41:17-20, 43:18-20, 52:4-6), when Yahweh brings Israel home. This new exodus is also described as a "new creation" (Is. 43:18-19). Once again, it is God's work and not human achievement. God is to establish His society, the New Jerusalem, where there will be no longer any distinction between the poor and the rich, where people will live once again by Yahweh's Torah in peace and justice (Is. 54:11-14). In Deuteron-Isaiah justice is synonymous with salvation.³³

Nations will recognise that Jerusalem is the centre of the world and the light, and its God is the only one. They will set out on pilgrimage to Jerusalem (Is. 45:14, 52: 13-15).

God makes the nation created out of his poor to be a model and not just a contrast-society as in the first Exodus. Israel will become, for all societies an instrument of salvation and a "point of attraction for all the nations."³⁴

Isaiah proclaims the "good news", that the Exile is ended, "the return from Babylon is seen as a re-enactment of the original liberation of Israel out of Egypt. That hope for a New Exodus was found as early as Hosea (Chap. 2) but now Deter-Isaiah claims that it is actually taking place."³⁵

3. Trito-Isaiah.

In Trito-Isaiah we see that the Israelites are disappointed, after coming back from exile to their own land. God's project seems once again betrayed. Social injustice has been felt again (Is. 58:3-6, 59:3-4). Because of the unfaithful Jews who wanted to impose themselves on the community at the cost of their brothers, it

³³ E. Van Oostrom, The Message of the Prophets, (Africa, 1986), p.43.

³⁴ Norbert Lohfink, Option for the Poor, (Berkeley, 1987), p.69.

³⁵ "Isaiah" (John j. Collins), The Collegeville Bible Commentary, Dianne Bergant and Robert Karris, (Minnesota, 1989), p.437.

leads to weakness, difficulties and division in the post-exilic community.³⁶ Salvation has not come as quickly as they hoped. The prophet disappointed, started to project these salvific events as fulfilled into the future—"those days". In the central text of Trito-Isaiah, chapters 60-62, the author in his language imitates Deter-Isaiah, and much of these chapters are simply a midrash on the texts of Deter-Isaiah, but he is giving a picture of a forward-looking promise. In Trito-Isaiah salvation is more related to obedience to the Law (Is. 56:2, 58:13) than to justice as in Deter-Isaiah.³⁷ The portrait of the future is even more colourful and dazzling, especially the pilgrimage of the nations to Zion.

Trito-Isaiah speaks about an eschatological event which will mark a turning-point from poverty to wealth, as well as the advent of peace and of just-dealing with one another. "The nations will be treated according to their behaviour towards God's poor—Israel".³⁸ "In the end, the reconstitution of Yahweh's society out of the poor and persecuted Israel, promotes the transformation of the whole of the world society." ³⁹

Is. 61:1-2 describes the work or mission of a Servant of God in any age: it is a mission of raising up the lower strata of society.⁴⁰ Salvation is promised to the humble (Is. 57:15, 66:2), to the God-seeking (Is. 65:10) and pious (Is. 57:1); they form a group of the poor and oppressed in Israel (Is. 61:1-7).⁴¹ But Isaiah shows us a clear example of religious universalism because those "Humble Ones" are open to strangers (Is. 56:3-8), and God's glory is to shine on all the nations (Is. 66:18-21). The vision of a new heaven and a new earth (Is. 65:17, 66:22) promises salvation to all who accept it (cf. 2Pt. 3:13, Rev. 21:1, Rom. 8:19-22), a bright messianic future in contrast to the present sad situation. This eschatological salvific action of God is once again described as a new and decisive Exodus (Is. 65:17ff). Israel will be a

³⁶ E. Van Oostrom, op. cit., p.43.

³⁷ *ibid.*, p.43.

³⁸ Norbert Lohfink, Option for the Poor (Berkeley, 1987), p.71.

³⁹ *ibid.*, p.69.

⁴⁰ The Collegeville Bible Commentary, p. 438.

⁴¹ Norbert Lohfink, Option for the Poor (Berkeley, 1987), p.71.

priestly mediator-people for all the nations as intended in Exodus and understood by the Christian communities (Is. 61:4-9, 60:10-11, cf. Ex. 19:5-6, 1Pt. 2:5-9).⁴² But there is something more to that prophesy of Isaiah: We can say that what Isaiah prophesies was not just future events but what had already started in his own time in the suffering of Israel.⁴³ Isaiah becomes a kind of hermeneutical key to the praying of the Psalter, especially the prayer of the poor. He can be used to shed light on the individual laments in the Psalms. The poor people who speak those psalms could be seen as the personification of Israel—the poor people of God living among the hostile nations of the world as persecuted and oppressed,⁴⁴ waiting for God's salvation. The individual could experience himself or herself as a member of this Israel understood collectively, the Israel which prays the Psalms.

But one thing that belonged to the core of the message in Deter-Isaiah does not reappear so clearly: that the whole change is brought about through the suffering and death of God's servant,⁴⁵ the idea that Yahweh reveals the truth about Himself in the very suffering and death of the poor and brings them salvation.⁴⁶

In this context we can enter the New Testament "gospel for the poor" proclaimed by Jesus from the very beginning of His ministry. Foundational to an important strand in the tradition of the Old Testament theology is the idea that God has selected a single people out of all the nations of the world in order to make this people a sign of salvation. His interest in the other nations is in no way impeded by this. When the people of God shines as a sign among the nations (cf. Is. 2:1-4), the other nations will learn from God's people; they will come together in Israel in order to participate—in Israel and mediated through Israel—in God's glory. But all this can happen only when Israel really becomes recognisable as a

⁴² E. Van Oostrom, op. cit., p.43.

⁴³ The Collegeville Bible Commentary, p.437.

⁴⁴ Norbert Lohfink, Option for the Poor (Berkeley, 1987), p.72.

⁴⁵ *ibid.*, p.71.

⁴⁶ *ibid.*, p.72.

sign of salvation, when God's salvation transforms his people recognisably, tangibly, visibly.⁴⁷

To sum up, for the Old Testament the existence of the poor in Israel is very often simply taken for granted. On the other hand the Book of Isaiah announces a messianic gospel for the poor. Should we conclude that Deuteronomy's social project and promises of future Israel as perfect society, entrusted with mission to the nations, described by Prophets are meant to come into fulfilment in the Messianic age in Person of Jesus?

This question brings us to Jesus' ministry to the poor as the Messiah; the Answer and the Fulfilment of Old Testaments promises.

⁴⁷ Gerhard Lohfink, Jesus and Community, 28.

IV. OPTION or the "POOR of YAHWEH" in JESUS' MINISTRY.

1. Jesus' concern for both the rich and the poor.

The Gospels repeat and deepen the Old Testament idea of Yahweh's preference for the poor, whom He practically identifies as His own people. Jesus, as the vicar of God, chose even to identify himself with those who are poorest and weakest in society cf. Matt. 25:40. He was born as a poor man and lived as such among his people in Israel showing compassion to them and doing good to all (Mk. 6:34, Mk. 7:37). He healed people who were in distressed circumstances (Lk. 4:31-41) and ate with those of low standing (sinners) (Lk. 15:2). He had nowhere to rest his head (Lk. 9:58), and even his burial was in another's tomb (Lk. 23:50-53).

There is no doubt that especially the Gospel of Luke, which is called "Good News for the poor", portrays Jesus as poor and as focusing on the poor, and as one whose mission is to bring good news to the poor (Lk. 4:18-30). The Gospel even pronounces the poor as blessed (Lk. 6:20).

But it does not mean that Jesus despised those who were rich and wealthy or that He glorified poverty for its own sake. Reading the Gospels we notice that Jesus had also friends who were well off, like those five women who used their own money to assist Him (Lk. 8:2-3); Zaccheaus, whose home He visited (Lk. 19:1-10); Lazarus, in whose home He received a gift, ointment, worth three hundred denarii (Jn. 12:5). He was accustomed to social amenities: He attended the wedding feast at Cana (Jn. 2: 1-11) and dined with publicans (Mt. 9:10-13). Simon the Pharisee (Lk. 7:36-50) and other leading Pharisees invited Jesus to dine in their homes (Lk. 11:37; 14:1). Jesus healed the slave of a centurion who was wealthy enough to build the synagogue in Caparnaum and used him as the example of faith (Lk. 7:1-10). He cured the daughter of Jairus, a synagogue official (Lk. 8:40-42, 49-56).

Superficial men contrasted His conduct with that of the ascetic John the Baptist (Mt. 11:18-19). Effortlessly He was able, like the Apostle, "to know what it is to be poor and to have plenty" (Phil. 4:12), "for neither one nor the other is outside the

reality where the Father's will can be done".⁴⁸ Jesus' teaching is directed to people at all points of the economic spectrum. The characters in his parables include rich landowners, poor peasants (Lk. 19:11-27) and middle managers, such as stewards (Lk. 11:35-40; 16:1-8). Luke attests that Jesus' followers were not only the poor and the outcast but also people of means. He mentions that Simon, James and John were partners in the fishing enterprise. Mark preserves the note that Zebedee and his sons were prosperous enough to have hired hands (Mk. 1:20). Well-to-do Joseph of Arimathea provides a new, unused rock-hewn tomb for Jesus' burial (Lk. 23:53).

2. Possessions.

Jesus is not condemning wealth as such but he strongly condemns the wrong attitudes towards riches and possessions.

What Jesus teaches concerning wealth is:

a) The danger of wealth.

"Let the rich man who believes that he owns his money take care, lest his money own him".⁴⁹

It is forbidden to take as one's own what belongs to God alone. If man becomes anxious more for worldly materials than seeking the Kingdom of God, his life is a failure because he has linked his life with what is perishable (cf. James 5:1-7). The wealthy fool (Lk. 12:19-20) was riveted to his riches:

"Soul, you have many good things laid up for many years... You fool, this night do they demand your soul of you; and the things that you have provided, whose will they be?"

Jesus criticizes also the Pharisees for being lovers of money (Lk. 16:14-15) and condemns the scribes who "devour the houses of widows" (Lk. 20:47). Jesus refused to become involved when His followers were quarrelling over an inheritance (Lk. 12:13-15). His action was symbolic: no matter how great man's possessions are, they have no power to give him life. Man's life does not consist in the abundance of possessions (Lk. 12:16). What a person is asked to do, is to

⁴⁸Albert Gelin, The Poor of Yahweh (Bangalore, India, 1978), p.123.

⁴⁹ ibid. p. 124.

seek the Kingdom of God first of all (Lk. 12:31). Those who put their trust in riches Jesus addresses as "Fools" and "So is he who lays up treasure for himself, and is not rich toward God" (Lk. 12:21). "For where your treasure is, there will your heart be also" (Lk. 12: 34). It becomes clear that having much material wealth can be a hindrance to enter the Kingdom of God. The answer to the rich man after his death corresponds to where he put his trust "You have received good things in you life" (Lk. 16:25). We ought to be aware how "treacherous any attachment to money can be for one's relationship with God and neighbor".⁵⁰ Judas is an example of how money can turn one away from the Lord (Lk. 12:5). The Parable of "The Rich man and Lazarus", in Luke chapter 16, on the other hand, shows how riches can turn one away from one's neighbor. Jesus declares that "it is easier for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to enter the Kingdom of God" (Lk. 18:25). Riches can, as well, prevent the rich from receiving the Word of God and from opening to God. They can easily lead to selfishness and self-centeredness. In this case, the wrong attitude of the rich man to his poverty, is described by Jesus in terms of idolatry: "You cannot serve God and mammon" (Lk. 16:13, Mt. 6:24). Jesus asks us not to be deceived by earthly goods: "The cares of this world and the deceitfulness of riches choke the word, and it is made fruitless" (Mt. 13:22, Lk. 8:14) and leads to loss of the self (Lk. 9:25). "Wealth isolates its possessors from God and fills them with a sense of their own self-sufficiency".⁵¹ That is why riches cannot be considered as an end. The rich by their attachment to possessions will not be present at the eschatological banquet; the poor, the oppressed and the outcasts of the society will (Lk. 14:16-24). Prosperity makes the fulfilment of a vocation more difficult, "To be satisfied with this world alone, without any yearning for the world to come, is to come to ultimate woe (Lk. 12:16-21, 16: 19-31)".⁵² Woes, which follow blessings in Lk. 6:24-26, are not condemnations or curses. They are rather warnings for people of means, who are full, satisfied with life. They are seen as

⁵⁰ Robert F. O'Toole, The Unity of Luke's Theology (Wilmington, 1984), p.135.

⁵¹ Barbara e. Reid, "Reading Luke with Poor", Bible Today, 32 (September, 1994), 283.

⁵² "Luke", The Layman's Bible Commentary, 8th ed., 1975, 18, p.77.

“religiously unfortunate, because their satisfaction can easily stunt their aspiration for God”.⁵³

“Those who seek to become rich fall into temptation and a snare and into many useless and harmful desires which plunge men into destruction and damnation. For covetousness is the root of all evils, and some in their eagerness to get rich have strayed from the faith and have involved themselves in many troubles” (1 Tim. 6:9-10).

It is not an acceptance of social injustice, nor merely a restatement of the Old Testament’s belief in the eternal reversal of roles; it is a highlighting of the potential values in depravation and the potential obstacles in possessions, relevant to a true appreciation of God’s reign in our lives”⁵⁴

b) The right use of possessions.

Possessions are entrusted by God to men who are to be stewards of them (Gen. 1:28-30). Man is accountable for the use of the wealth before God (Lk. 16:1-13), because as man participates in God’s creative power, he is to continue the work of creation according to God’s will. And man is encouraged to make friends for himself by means of unrighteous mammon in order that when it fails he may be received into eternal habitations (cf. Lk. 16:9).

From his disciples Jesus demands complete detachment. He forces them to face the essential decision: “He who does not renounce all that he has cannot be my disciple” (Lk. 14:33).

For all, He recommends alms-giving as the practice of charity. Jesus teaches that no one can serve both God and mammon (Lk. 16:13) and that people should sell their belongings and give alms, thus ensuring an “inexhaustible treasure in heaven” (Lk. 12:33). The basic purpose of wealth is to help those who live in misery.

Jesus is calling the rich not to put their trust in riches but to use them properly, to share with those who are in need. Invited to a meal, Jesus advised: “When you have a reception, invite beggars and cripples, the lame and the blind” (Lk. 14:13).

⁵³ Leonard Duohan, Luke (New Mexico, 1982), p.243.

⁵⁴ *ibid.* p. 244.

The demands of justice and charity are the steadying forces which protect man from Christ's threat: "Woe to him who is not rich toward God" (Lk. 12:21).

The Gospels introduce also a new note, namely, that these relative values are confronted with the Kingdom of God, a sharply defined absolute value which is the pearl of great price requiring the surrender of all that we have (Mt. 13:46-46). He who aspires to this Kingdom fixes his heart where the true treasures are to be found, far from the reach of grasping thieves or the destructive power of moths (Lk. 12:33-34).

3. Value of poverty.

In the Bible material poverty is not exalted or represented as a value in itself. It is rather presented as an evil which destroys what God intended for His people since creation and has restated in the Exodus Event, that there will be no poor among His People (cf. Dt. 15:3 and cf. Gen. 1:31—whatever God created was very good). Jesus' preferential option for the poor in the New Testament is a prolongation of Yahweh's option undertaken in the Old Testament. The poor are blessed by God because He is merciful, and not because they are poor. It is not poverty for its own sake that is blessed but a poverty in the context of being called to hope and trust in God (Lk. 5:28, 12:33, 14:33, 18:18-23), and in the context of the response in faith to Jesus' "Good News" (Lk. 7:7, 8:48). Material poverty, in itself, is of no use, unless it serves to lead the human being towards God. Only then, as St. Thomas says: "poverty is worthy of praise because by liberating man from earthly care it allows him to concentrate more freely on things divine".⁵⁵

Jesus warns the materially poor, those who have deep in their heart an ingrained hunger for riches. Such is the meaning of His words about the treasure and the heart, the source of all desires (Lk. 12:34).

As an example of the poor totally relying on God is the poor woman putting her last coins into the treasury (Lk. 21:4).

⁵⁵ Albert Galin, *op. cit.* p.123.

"No one has better avoided canonising poverty in itself than Luke, no one has spoken of it with equal sympathy as he did".⁵⁶

Jesus sought to make Israel a reconciled community, therefore he turned to the rich (Lk. 19:1-10) and the poor (Lk. 6:20), to the just (Mk. 2:17) and to the sinners (Lk. 19:10).

Jesus did not believe that the real problem is in the just distribution of wealth or money. That is why He refused the temptation of the "economic Messiah" suggested by Satan (cf. Lk. 4:3-4). Jesus knew very well that economy does not save, what is really needed is a change of heart which brings changes in society: "repent, and believe in the gospel" (Mk.1:15).

4. The servant of Yahweh, mission and its consequences.

Jesus of Nazareth preached the kingdom of God and befriended the poor, which refers to the Old Testament role of the king as God's vicar who was to care for the widow, the orphan and the poor. His ministry is the prolongation of the Old Testament work of God among His people—the divine act of liberation on behalf of the poor—as in Exodus. This action is unique and proper only to God, who does not compromise with existing structures but creates something new. The option for the poor takes in Jesus its highest point and ought to be understood in the light of the Old Testament options, which reached fulfilment in Him. The People of God, suffocating under the weight of sin and suffering, were waiting with hope for the liberation that was promised to them (Mt. 1:21). In their midst Jesus made this announcement:

"This is the time of fulfilment. The reign of God is at hand: reform your lives and believe in the Gospel" (Mk. 1:15).

Jesus as "the anointed one" (Messiah) brings glad tidings to the poor (Lk. 4:18); through the wonderful deeds and surprising attitudes He showed that the announced Kingdom is already present in the history of Him, who makes known

⁵⁶ *ibid.* p.125.

the New Law of that Kingdom (Mt. 5:1-7:28, Lk. 6:17-49). Jesus' presence unmasks the evil one, reveals God's redeeming love to the world.⁵⁷

Considering the option for the poor in the New Testament we have to take into consideration two elements which are present already in the Old Testament:

- 1). God's preferential option for the poor—liberation from slavery, oppression e.g. Exodus and Exile are God's action.
- 2). The New Society notion which accompanies always God's option; it is not just a sporadic help given to the poor, but the fact that God wants to eliminate any poverty at all. He wants to create a nation which will live by His laws and there will be no poor among them. Society which will have a mission to other nations as a contrast and model society.

We can notice in Jesus' ministry that these two elements are present.

What are the elements of these two options, what kind of liberty, and what kind of society does Jesus propose as the eschatological fulfilment of the option for the poor? To answer those questions we reflect on the key text from Luke chapter 4, which gives us an understanding of Jesus' ministry to the poor and puts it in proper context. Lk. 4:18-19, (Mt. 11:5, Lk 7:22):

"The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed, to proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord."

This text, used by Jesus to inaugurate his ministry, gives us some idea of Jesus' program, where He:

- a) - **reveals the source of his power:** the Spirit, which is linked with his baptism (Lk. 3:21-22) where Jesus is identified as the Messiah, the "anointed one" and Isaiah's "Servant" (Is. 42:1ff). Jesus, in the power of that Spirit, overcame evil spirits in all dimensions: individual and social. In turn, He will endow his servants the apostles with the same Spirit at Pentecost cf. Lk. 24:48-49.

⁵⁷ Puebla, 3rd General Conference of Latin American Bishops (London, 1980), p.61.

b) - defines his mission as Messiah using prophecies from Isaiah chapter 61 and 58 which describe His goals, and the kind of mission Jesus is to fulfil. And the same task Jesus entrusts to the Christians, to accomplish through the Spirit.

Jesus mission is to:

- bring "Good new to the poor"—The Poor, as in Mary's canticle (Lk. 1:52), are not only those economically poor but also those who are "marginalized or excluded from human fellowship, the outcasts".⁵⁸

The notion of the poor underwent many changes during the history of Israel. First it had merely a social significance, but over the centuries took a spiritual meaning as in the Psalms: "Anawim". By the time of Jesus the poor person had become the type of someone who is pleasing to God, that is, one who recognises his total dependence upon God. Luke in his gospel recognises the "poor" in religious terms as those dependant on God, who very often are also the economically poor (Lk. 1:45, 2:14). To understand the meaning of the poor to whom Jesus addresses His message, we are to take that notion in the broad sense which is presented by the Old Testament and the Gospels. The "Poor in spirit" blessed in Matthew, and the "Poor" interpreted economically in Luke, are two aspects of the concept of the poor.

- "release of captives" refers to the forgiveness of sins (Lk. 1:77) and of debts (Lk. 11:4)

- "liberty" and "freedom" to those who are oppressed is used by Luke to describe the forgiveness and freedom from the "captivity of sin" (Lk. 1:77, 24:47).⁵⁹ Luke will conclude and climax his gospel with a mission to preach repentance for the forgiveness of sins to all the nations (Lk. 24:47).

Jesus' conquest of Satan and the demons also carries the theme of the liberation of the poor; "If it is by the finger of God that I drive out the devil, then be sure that the Kingdom of God has already come upon you" (Lk. 11:20). Jesus' power to exorcise demons is the sign of the appearance of the kingdom, because freedom

⁵⁸ Luke Johnson, The Gospel of Luke, Sacra Pagina, ed. Daniel J. Harrington (Minnesota, 1991), III, p.79.

⁵⁹ Robert J. Karris, Invitation to Luke (New York 1977), p.69.

for the oppressed can come about only by overcoming the forces of evil. Jesus brought liberation to the poor, and that "liberation is no other than the overthrowing of everything that is against the fulfilment of their humanity".⁶⁰ The gospel means the liberation which comes to the poor and which gives them the strength and the courage to break the condition of servitude. This is what the Incarnation means. "God in Christ comes to the weak and the helpless and becomes one with them, taking their condition of oppression as his own and thus transforming their slave-existence into a liberated one".⁶¹ There was a deeper poverty, a worse captivity, a more tragic blindness, a more shattering oppression than that of the ancient Babylon or the Roman Empire of their day. It was that brought by Satan. Here was the "stronger-one" who had come to invade Satan's domain and conquer him (Lk. 11:22). "The reason the Son of God appeared was to destroy the works of the devil" (1 John 3:8) So Jesus' ministry as the Healer is so important and his claim to have power to forgive sins—it brings freedom and liberation from the power of Satan. What could not be achieved by the Law because of human wickedness, was achieved in Christ and communicated to us by His saving Grace. The initial redemption at the Exodus was not sufficient. The real redemptive "rest" of creation, to which God was leading his people, would come only in the Messianic Age (Heb. 3:7, 4:10). Therefore by claiming Lordship over the sabbath, Jesus was declaring that the Messianic Age had come. God is now present in him. "God had ceased from his work of creation, but he was active in his work of redemption even on the Sabbath".⁶² For Jesus to work redemptively on that day, therefore, was a sign that the Messianic Age had dawned in him. Jesus was fulfilling it. "The Son of man is Lord of the Sabbath" (Lk. 6:5).

- "recovering of sight to the blind"—sin and disease were much connected in the Bible. Jesus, healing a sick person, does it through forgiveness of sins as in the case of the Paralytic (Mk. 2:5-12). It is sign of God's work in Jesus and the sign of the New Creation: giving of life, restoring the order of creation.

⁶⁰ James M. Cone, "God of the Oppressed" (New York, 1975), p.77.

⁶¹ *ibid.*, p.78.

⁶² The Layman's Bible Commentary, op. cit. p.77.

c) - proclaims "the acceptable year of the Lord"—"year of jubilee", when people are freed from debt (Dt. 15:2), all slaves were freed and property returned to the original owner (Lev.25:8-12). Thus, the good news to the poor, in the time of the Exile, would be understood as release from Babylonian captivity, return to the homeland with rejoicing: Isaiah calls it "the year of the Lord's favour" the year of grace (Is. 61:2). But coming from Exile did not bring the fulfilment for which they hoped, so Isaiah projects this promise into future, speaking of the coming Messianic Age, when "sin which had led to the Babylonian captivity would be dealt with".⁶³ So Jesus boldly links this coming Age to himself: "Today this scripture is fulfilled" (Lk. 4:21). What Isaiah had so eloquently expressed is fulfilled in Jesus. Salvation is "now" present as option and reality (Lk. 19:1ff), the Kingdom which they had long awaited is already present here and now. But it is different from the expectations of many, so Jesus meets with rejection throughout His ministry. The Salvation which Jesus brought, and which He refers to at the beginning of his ministry (Lk. 4:18), "encompasses both physical healing and inclusion in the eschatological people of God".⁶⁴ The whole of Jesus' ministry flowed from that vision projected in his inaugural sermon (cf. Lk. 4:40- 41, 5:15, 6:17-19, 7:20-22).

5.Twofold attitude in Jesus' ministry to the poor.

In Jesus' ministry to the poor we can notice a twofold attitude:

A) Work of the Messiah

The healing miracles were an integral part of Israel's eschatological restoration (Is. 35:5-6, Mt. 11:5) In that eschatological age no disease is permitted (Is. 30:26)

Healing brings about Salvation (Lk. 8:38, 48 ,18:42, Acts 4:9, 14:9), "for a miracle is an example of the saving power of God".⁶⁵ Jesus as an exorcist and healer seems to identify his activity with his mission as the Messiah to preach the

⁶³ *ibid.*, p.57.

⁶⁴ Charles Talbert, "Reading Luke", A literary and Theological Commentary on the Third Gospel, (New York, 1982), p.55.

⁶⁵ John P. Kealy, Luke's Gospel Today (New Jersey, 1979), p.220.

good news of the Kingdom (Lk. 4:43). As Luke, in 4: 22-27, points out, God's salvation is not reserved to Jews alone but has a universal scope in Jesus. Peter states the position well:

"I begin to see how it is that God shows no partiality. Rather, the man of any nation who fears God and acts uprightly is acceptable to him" (Acts 10:34-35).

So this kind of Jesus' ministry is universal and not exclusive.

The sign of the Kingdom of God is life, a life so abundant that lepers are cleansed and the dead raised to life. This is already happening in what Jesus is doing among the poor and outcasts of Galilee: for those who experience deprivation, abundant life is being received as good news. Those in positions of power, on the other hand, feel this as a threat and accuse Jesus of working wonders in the name of Beelzebub (Mk. 3:22). In these circumstances Jesus declares the poor and those who weep as blessed, and proclaims that those who are rich and have their fill now will find the Kingdom a cause of sorrow (Lk. 6:20-26).

The response that Jesus' message aroused among the poor was such that the people received him at the Passover celebrations in Jerusalem as the representative of "the coming kingdom of our father David" (Mk. 11:10).

The proclamation of the Kingdom of God is what the Bible calls "the Good News from God" ⁶⁶ (Mk. 1:14), and that news is proclaimed to the poor as first recipients (Mt. 11:2-5)

Who are those poor Jesus administers to?

Those are the outcast of Jewish society ruled by religious laws, those people who found themselves despised and marginalized. To those, Jesus announces liberty, healing, salvation, reconciliation with society and God:

1. *Tax collectors*: They were despised by Jews for collaborating with Romans; when John the Baptist calls to repentance, they are among the first to be baptised (cf. Lk. 3:12). They rejoice and give praise to God for this opportunity (Lk. 7:29). Jesus

⁶⁶ Jorge Pixley and Clodovis Boff, "The Bible, the Church and the Poor", Liberation Theology, (Wellwood, 1989), VI, p.95.

chooses one of them to be an apostle (Lk. 5: 27-32) and accepts his invitation to a reception at which many tax-collectors are present (Lk. 15:1). Jesus violates the Jewish laws of ceremonial purity by not merely having contact with a tax-collector, but actually inviting himself to his house for a meal (friendship implication). Zaccheus responds to Jesus and reforms his life (Lk. 19:1-10).

2. *Those possessed by evil spirits*, whom society shuns and fears (cf. Lk. 4:31-37) "Be silent and come out of him!" (Lk. 9:37-43; 8:26-39 - the Gerasene demoniac).

3. *The Unclean*—lepers were considered as unclean (cf. Lk. 5:12-16; 17:11-19, Mt.8:1-4). The Woman with the hemorrhage—that makes her ritually unclean (cf. Lk. 8:40-48), rejected and separated from society.

4. *The sick*: sickness was connected with the notion of sin as the consequence of it. All demons and sickness have to give way to the Messiah. Many diseased people who approached Jesus were the sign of humanity in need of a Healing Saviour, and Jesus showed Himself to be one. Jesus acknowledges that connection of sin and sickness: "Man" (Jesus addresses the paralysed man), "your sins are forgiven you" (Lk. 5:20). But when asked by his Disciples: "Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?" (Jn. 9:2), Jesus answers: "It was not that this man sinned, or his parents, but that the work of God might be made manifest in him" (Jn. 9:3). Crowds tried to touch him (Lk 8:46), as a healing power went out from him to cure all (Lk. 5:17). Lk. 4:40-41: "he laid his hands on every one of them and healed them. And demons also came out of many..." Those who find in Jesus healing are many:

- The Paralysed and helpless (Lk. 5:17-26; 6:6-11, 6: 17-19, Mt. 8:5-13, 9:35)
- The Man with withered hand, (Mt. 12:9-13, Lk. 6:6ff)
- The Blind man,(Mt. 12:22, Mk 8:22-26, Lk. 18:35-43)
- The Dumb man, (Lk. 11:14-20)

5. *Widows*: being without relatives in society put them in the state a curse (Lk. 7:11-17—Widow of Nain).

6. *Sinners*: in a society governed by religious values, public sinners were despised and considered as outcast and unfit for the Kingdom of God . Jesus in his ministry reached out to them:

- He eats with them: Levi (Lk. 5:29-32), Zaccheaus (Lk. 19:1-10)
- He reconciles and forgives them: the sinful woman who prostitutes herself (Lk. 7:36-5, Jn. 8:1-11), the thief (Lk. 23:39-43).

Jesus draws them all to repentance and reform of life; "I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance" (Lk. 5:32).

7. *Women*: they were certainly underprivileged in Jesus' time. They were considered as man's possessions, second to men in all aspects of social and religious life. Jesus breaks this custom and treats them on the same level, showing that they all are equal before God.

He Even calls one of them "daughter of Abraham" which was never used in Jewish tradition. Luke uses contrasts of man and woman in such a way that women are presented as better examples of discipleship:

- Zachariah doubts but Mary believes, (Lk. 1:18-20; 1:34-35).
- Peter's mother-in-law and service, (Lk. 4: 38)
- The penitent woman and love, (Lk. 7:36-50)
- Magdalene and repentance, (Lk. 8:2)
- The hemorrhage victim and faith, (Lk. 8:40-56)
- Mary's prayerful listening to Jesus, (Lk. 10:38-42)
- the faith of Jesus' Mother, (Lk. 11:27-28)
- the perseverance of the widow, (Lk. 18: 1-8)
- the consolation of the women on the way to Calvary, (Lk. 23:27-31)
- the women at the tomb are the first heralds of the Risen Lord, (Lk. 14:22-24)

8. *Samaritans* are another group of outcasts in Jesus' day; Jesus uses them as exemplary people in contrast to the Jews:

- the Good Samaritan (Lk. 10:33) "Jesus challenges the values of Jewish society by uniting two apparently contradictory words for the same person: the Samaritan and Neighbor" (Lk.10:36).⁶⁷
- the only grateful leper (Lk. 17:16)

⁶⁷ Leonard Doohan, op. cit., p.251.

9. *Gentiles*: in the group of religiously unacceptable people we could include also the Gentiles. Jesus associates with them and commends the quality of their faith Lk. 7: 1-10: "I have not found such faith in Israel".

He manifests his intention to go to the Gentiles (Lk. 4: 16-30) and his conviction that they will enter the kingdom ahead of the chosen people (Lk. 13:28-30).

Jesus took the side of the poor, the hungry, the mourning, the burdened, the ill, the sinners, the tax collectors, the prostitutes, the Samaritans, the women because these were the groups which were denied equality or even refused community in contemporary Jewish society. "They were shunned by the community, but welcomed by Jesus".⁶⁸

Jesus' attitude to the outcasts of society and religion of his day is an example and task for his followers, who are to be bearers of this good news to all the nations (Mt. 28:16-20).

Early in his ministry, while still in Galilee, Jesus entrusted his Apostles with the mission of preaching the good news. He gave them the authority to expel demons (Mk. 1:14) and to them He gave the Kingdom (Lk. 22:29). Jesus sent his followers out two by two to spread the gospel and to carry out the work of the Messiah:

"He called the Twelve together and gave them power and authority over all devils and to cure diseases, and he sent them out to proclaim the Kingdom of God and to heal..." (Lk. 9:1-2).

The poor to whom Jesus turns respond by faith and acceptance of the Kingdom. Jesus uses them as examples of faith and they are the ones who follow him. But Jewish leaders have rejected Jesus from the very beginning (Lk. 4:22-30).

"Although Jesus' ministry surely has a social dimension, it cannot be equated with mere social action".⁶⁹ Jesus rejects the temptation to be the economic Messiah because he knows that there is no solution to the poverty or marginalizing of certain groups in society through changes in existing unjust structures, but takes

⁶⁸ *ibid.*, p.250.

⁶⁹ Robert Karris, *op. cit.*, p.69.

God's approach to solve the problem, namely, He creates something new, a new society where there will be no poor any more, and that is the Good News to the poor. But this can happen only through the change of heart.

B) Eschatological family = New Israel.

"For even when Israel as a whole rejected his message, Jesus did not abandon the idea of community, the idea that the reign of God must have a people".⁷⁰ Jesus, without losing sight of the whole of Israel, bound the reign of God to his community of disciples. As Luke 12:32 puts it: "Fear not, little flock, for it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom". Restoration of the Twelve tribes of Israel was expected during the eschatological time of salvation (Ez. 37, 39:13-29). Jesus' constitution of the twelve disciples can be understood as the symbolic prophetic action of fulfilment. Jesus does not give up the notion of the chosen people as an instrument of God's salvation; He chooses 12 Apostles who symbolises the whole of Israel, Twelve tribes (cf. Lk. 6:12-16). It is for this reason that the replacement of Judas was so important, because if Passover corresponds to the time of Exodus, Pentecost (after 50 days) was the feast of the Covenant of Sinai. The Twelve and Pentecost symbolised without doubt the new people of the God-based structure of the new-born community (Rev. 21:14). This New Israel, built on the twelve Apostles as a foundation, is not anymore of blood but of faith, and the new family of Jesus' brothers and sisters extends far beyond the circle of actual disciples (Mk. 3:32-35)—"whoever does the will of God is my brother, and sister and mother." So, those who believed in Jesus and followed him belong to this family, which as in Exodus becomes the nation among the nations. Jesus restored the People of God because He was convinced that the eschatological gathering of the people by God had already begun now, just as was the coming of the Kingdom of God, and it was occurring through him. That is why Jesus, despite his openness to the Gentiles, restricted himself to Israel (Mt. 10:6, 15:24, Mk. 7:27). He had to work in Israel, for only if the light of the reign of God shone in God's people would it be possible for other nations to undertake the

⁷⁰ Gerhard Lohfink, Jesus and Community (London, 1984), p.28.

eschatological pilgrimage (Is. 66:18-21, Is. 2:3-4) to Jerusalem, which will be light and salvation to them.

An Option for the poor as referring to some kind of aid for the poor that is possible without faith and without transformation of the world within the believing community was not that of Jesus. The message of Jesus was for everyone: this society was passing away to give place to a new one that God was preparing to take its place. This announcement brought the need to turn away from ties within the existing society so as to leave room for the new society of peace and justice. And this brought its own judgement: those who felt at home in a social order that was dominated by the Temple and that was under the Roman empire, do not receive it as good news, but see it as a threat. And that's why the religious leaders crucified Jesus. His mission was not that of the personal, individual act of charity to the poor only. His news was to bring about a new order, a new society which was opposed to the existing one. Here we can notice clearly some references to the Exodus story where God does not look for the changes in the existing society of oppression which produced the poor, but God took the unique and mysterious action of taking them out of the system and creating a new society living according to God's law, and build on just laws where there will be not poor among them (cf. Dt.15:4).

1. Discipleship

One can enter this new society only by following Jesus. There is no cheap route apart from faith. Those who respond to Jesus' Good News positively follow. We can speak of two kinds of disciples of Jesus:

a). those who accepted the message of Jesus but remained in their villages or towns to await the reign of God (Joseph, Zacchaeus, Lazarus, Mary , Martha)

b). the circle of disciples who followed Jesus as a firmly fixed group, but cannot be understood as the Twelve only, as Luke shows it was a much larger group: Cleopas (Lk. 24:18), Joseph Barsabbas and Matthias (Acts 1:23). Five women followed Jesus and supported him with their possessions: Mary Magdalene, Johanna the wife of Chuza, Susanna, Mary the mother of James and Salome. (Lk.

8:1-3, Mk.15:40-41). From these Jesus demands total commitment and detachment from possessions: He tells a rich official, who wanted to do more than keep the commandments, to sell all, distribute it to the poor, and then to follow him. The disciple is to be detached from his possessions (Lk. 18:18-23). Poverty is proposed by Jesus as an apostolic ideal. When he sent the disciples on the mission it was with the advice of detachment and simplicity of life. His directives were preserved in "a handbook for missionaries" (Mk. 6:8-11, Matt. 10:5-14, Lk. 9: 1-5). "And he instructed them to take nothing for their journey, but a staff—no wallet, no bread, no money in their girdle; but to wear sandals and not to put on two tunics" (Mk. 6:8). Mark gives that for Palestinian world, but Luke and Matthew enlarged that handbook and only gold and silver were specially excluded. This fact gives us an insight into the meaning of apostolic poverty. "It is fidelity to the life of Jesus, to His joyous free poverty which was real but not deliberately ascetic. It is a fidelity that becomes creative in more complex civilisations. Imitation of Christ is not literal but inventive".⁷¹ To meditate on the Cross is to realise that poverty is an integral part of the apostolate.

2. The New Testament communities = the Israel of the "poor"

The will of God for the New family of Jesus was expressed anew in the "Sermon on the Mount" where Jesus proclaimed the new social order of the people of God before the whole of Israel (Mt. 4:23-5:2, Lk. 6:17-20). This sermon is permeated with concern for the underprivileged and the outcast; it is a statement of commitment to social justice and reform.

a). New Audience.

The Sermon is directed to the disciples of Jesus: "a great crowd of his disciples" (Lk. 6:17), and in the hearing of the crowd (Matt. 5:1). Luke specifies this crowd as those who are in need, the helpless and abandoned, Jews and Gentiles, "a great multitude of people from Judea and Jerusalem and the seacoast of Tyre and Sidon" (Lk. 6:17)

⁷¹ Albert Gelin, *op. cit.*, p. 125.

"The audience symbolises the universality of Jesus' mission and salvation".⁷²

b). New values.

To the oppressed of society, the have-nots, those who constantly weep in their distress and those whose faith is mocked by society, Jesus brings glad tidings, proclaims liberty, healing and release (Lk. 4:18) and calls them blessed (Matt. 5, Lk. 6). Matthew sees Jesus as the New Moses who has come to fulfil the Law, the Torah, (Matt. 5:17-19, cf. Dt. 5:17-18, Ex. 20:13). A new way, pointed out for the follower of Christ, is the way of righteousness—the key to achieve the Kingdom of heaven. Matthew explains the New Law in the way of antithesis (Matt. 5:21-48) and points out a new attitude (Matt. 6:1-7:27).

Love of enemies

Christian love ought to be universal and even that of enemies: "Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you" (Mt.5:44, Lk. 6:27,35). That call for universal love is connected with the call to perfection and mercy like that of the Father; "You therefore must be perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect" (Matt. 5:48), and "Be merciful, even as your Father is merciful" (Lk. 6:36).

No judgement.

Jesus also demands new attitudes in our daily dealings with others, particularly within the community life of the Church: "Judge not, and you will not be judged" (Lk. 6: 37, 42). There should be no judging or condemnation of others, no finding fault or destroying their good name by petty criticisms. Rather to show compassion, forgiveness—"Forgive, and you will be forgiven" (Lk. 6:37)—and understanding (Lk. 6:38).

Not "belonging", but "doing" is what counts.

New criteria are given for judging the authenticity and fidelity of one's commitment (Lk. 6:43-49): "Each tree is known by its yield." This tells us what is in the disciple's heart." Each Disciple must commit himself not only by word, but also by obedience to the teaching of Jesus (Lk. 6:46). On this foundation discipleship is built: "Any man who desires to come to me will hear my words and put them into practice" (Lk. 6:47).

⁷² John P. Lealy, *op. cit.*, p.220.

"Disciples are called to be the doers of the word, for by their fruits they will be judged".⁷³

The audience for this proclamation is the world, and the message implies a reversal of the world's values.

Renunciation of violence (Matt. 5: 39-42, Lk. 6:29-30).

The true people of God, the true family of Jesus, is not allowed to impose anything through force, and cannot fight for their rights with means of force: "Behold, I send you as sheep in the midst of wolves ... when they deliver you up, do not be anxious how you are to speak or what you are to say ... for it is not you who speak, but the Spirit of your Father speaking through you" (Matt. 10:16-20). As a contrast-society, it makes them a sign of the reign of God and of the new ethics and the new society, an alternative one. In renunciation of violence they become poor and totally dependent on God. No struggle for rights is acceptable within the true people of God: "To him who strikes you on the cheek, offer the other also..." (Lk. 6:28), "Do not resist one who is evil" (Matt. 5:39). Anyone who conducts such struggles introduces the structure of pagan society into the people of God and thus obscures the character of the Church as the contrast-society.

Followers of Jesus should suffer injustice rather than impose their rights through violence, even if the means are legitimate. What is to be the response of the Christian to evil? "Overcome evil with good." (Rom. 12:21)

Diakonia

This New Israel once again, as in Exodus, is to become a Society of Brothers and Sisters, where the relationships of superiority are not permitted (cf. Mk. 10:41-45). Their relationship ought to be built on the basis of *diakonia*, service: "Whoever would be great among you must be your servant, and whoever would be first among you must be slave of all" (Mk. 10: 43-44, Lk. 22:26). Matt. 23:8-12: "But you are not to be called rabbi..."—An end of "Fathers" in the new society, Jesus points to one Father, in Heaven, and we are to be brothers and sisters. Our relationship is to be built on the principle of service (cf. Matt. 23 :11).

⁷³ Leonard Doohan, op. cit., p. 246.

Jesus puts himself as the example 'I am among you as one who serves" (Lk. 22:27).

It is a new way of life for the disciples with a radical change of values now. The Kingdom demands love even of one's enemies; forgiveness, self-criticism, not condemning others, obedience to the person of Jesus and his words. The Sermon clarifies that Christianity has a new audience and a new set of values; it demands new attitudes and sets a new goal. "These simple attitudes, permeated with benevolence and universal concern, would have a revolutionary impact on community life were they faithfully lived."⁷⁴

Jesus' preaching was not addressed to the nations, states or society in general. He did not seek to establish contact with Herod Antipas or Pontius Pilate in order to tell them how they should govern. He always had in mind Israel or the community of disciples, which was the prefiguration of the new Israel in which the reign of God was to shine. The final goal is the transformation of the entire world. This transformation presupposes, however, that the people of God first live the new reality in its own midst. The antisocial and corrupt system of a dominant society cannot be attacked more sharply than by the formation of an antisociety in its midst (cf. Exodus).

c). Poverty of persecution.

Where Jesus' word is believed in and life is based on his truth, something new and different emerges in the midst of the world, to everyone's astonishment. There comes into being the miracle of a society in which people can relate to material things and to one another in a new way and where, as a result, there is no more poverty. But in the same measure as the members of this society experience the abolition of every kind of poverty, they also discover how the old society closes ranks against them and begins to persecute them (cf. Lk. 6:23). The miracle of destroying poverty among them at the same time leads them into the poverty of persecution; both realities go together. Christians are hated by others since they expose the social structure of reality as deceit. They truly become "Poor of Yahweh". In this light we can easily understand the logic of the beatitudes in

⁷⁴ *ibid.*, p.245.

Matthew's version (Matt. 5: 3-12) or in Luke's (Lk. 6:20-23). "Poor are not only those in spirit, with inner commitment to poverty, but also the really poor people in whom the Spirit of God, according to Isaiah 61:1, has already begun the work."⁷⁵ The poor, the hungry, those who mourn and those who thirst for a more just society are called blessed and the reign of God is theirs. Theirs is the new society. Those blessings are followed by the blessing of all those who are to follow this new way of life which is called righteousness. It comes from the "paradox of the fate of the servant of Yahweh: salvation comes only in and through persecution."⁷⁶ In Luke 21:12-19 Jesus appears as the saviour of the persecuted Christians: "they will deliver you up to the synagogues... for my name's sake." (v. 12). Christians are to share the fate of Jesus who was rejected and persecuted by religious leaders because of His words and works. Thus, the death of Stephen is compared to the death of Jesus (Acts 7: 54-56).

Christians (New Israelites) will be judged by whether they have eliminated poverty among themselves. The Church community by, following Jesus and acting accordingly, will be saved. The nations/gentiles, that is, those who do not belong to God's kingdom, will be judged by their conduct toward the "poor of Yahweh" or the "least of all" (Christians = Jesus' brothers and sisters), when they meet them in the flesh and in their needs—"Whatever you have done to the least of my brother you have done to me" (Matt. 25:31-46). Christ remains present among and in the poor Christians.

d). Role of the Poor in the Plan of Salvation

Mission and sign to the nations.

Matthew closes his gospel with Jesus' commissioning his Apostles: "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore, make disciples of all the nations..." (Matt. 28:16-20). Jesus did gather around himself, in the midst of Israel and for-Israel, people who were for him the new family of God, the true Israel, the eschatological City of God. For Jesus, the reign of God shone already in these people. The future kingdom was already symbolically present in

⁷⁵ Norbert Lohfink, Option for the Poor (Berkeley, 1987), p.75.

⁷⁶ *ibid.* p.75.

them. "Israel was not chosen for its own sake, but as a sign of universal salvation for all nations".⁷⁷ God's holy people in the world has simply, through the mere fact of its existence, the task of sanctifying the rest of the world (1Pet. 2:9).

With the option for the poor is connected inseparably the notion of the new society, an alternative one, exemplary for the other nations. Nations seeing this light, the town built on the hill, the new Jerusalem, are to come to it. Salvation is to occur through God's people. The reign of God does not mean subjection of the world but a call to freedom for the world.

Kingdom of God.

Jesus, proclaiming the gospel for the poor, gives them the promise of inheritance of the Kingdom of God as their reward. The Kingdom of God, proclaimed by Jesus, is already present, but its fulfilment is still to come. So there is this tension between the present and the future. The *basileia* is solely and exclusively an act of God. That kingdom is tangible and visible, first in Jesus himself, but also in God's people whom Jesus gathered together as a new society. "The proclamation of the Kingdom of God is thus connected to the idea of the end-time people of God".⁷⁸ The Kingdom of God and his sons (Lk. 6:35) is a Kingdom of mercy, especially towards the oppressed and the poor, but also towards one's enemies, and thus it is very different from the power- kingdoms of this world (Lk. 4:5f.).

"God's kingdom needs also a people because His dominion is aimed at every realm of life"⁷⁹. It not only wants to change people's hearts, but also their bodies, environment and the society in which they live. Only when the entire society, in all spheres of life lives according to God's social order will God's kingdom be established in the world's midst. On this basis, then it is highly questionable to say that God's kingdom only comes in the person of Jesus. The kingdom cannot come in one individual. Either it appears in a social form or it does not appear at

⁷⁷ Gerhard Lohfink, op. cit., p.70.

⁷⁸ Gerhard Lohfink, "The Eexegetical Predicament Concerning Jesus' Kingdom of God Proclamation", Summer, 36, (2, 1989), p. 105.

⁷⁹ *ibid.*, p.109.

all. Thus, from the beginning to the end of his life, Jesus sought to gather Israel together into the end-time people of God.

One cannot speak about the kingdom of God without speaking about the Church. Certainly, the two are not identical. However, without believers who accept the *basileia* in the new society of the church, there is no kingdom of God in the world.

“Certainly it is correct to say that Jesus’ proclamation of the *basileia* gains its ultimate concretion through his death and resurrection. However, the New Testament theology says that for the believer death does not happen at life’s end, but already in baptism. In baptism one dies to the old life in order to begin a new life before God; one dies to the old society in order to live in the new society of God’s people.”⁸⁰

Christ himself, as the head of the body, the Church, is the kingdom of God. The way Jesus announced the Kingdom of God shows that it is the poor who in the first place can receive it with repentance and joy. That joy of the announcement of a new society in which justice will penetrate everything, bursts out among the poor and is hardly felt among the rich. That’s why Jesus declares that the good news of the Kingdom is for the poor. The sign of the Kingdom of God is life, a life so abundant that lepers are cleansed and the dead raised to life. This is already happening in what Jesus is doing among the poor and outcasts of Galilee (Matt. 11:2-5).

Among the poor this abundant life is being received as the Good News. Jesus declares that the poor and those who weep are blessed, and proclaims that those who are rich and have their fill now will find the Kingdom a cause of sorrow (Lk. 6:20-26). The proclamation of the Good News was the announcement of a new reality—the Kingdom of God—and that proclamation was commended by Jesus to His Apostles: “to proclaim the Kingdom of God and to heal...” (Lk. 9:1-3).

The Light.

“Let your light so shine before men that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven” (Matt. 5: 16, Lk. 11:33, Mk. 4:21). Jn.

⁸⁰ *ibid.*, p.110.

8:12: "I am the light of the world; he who follows me will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life."

Salt.

"You are the salt of the earth; but if salt has lost its taste, how shall its saltiness be restored?" (Matt. 5:13), Mk. 9: 49-50, Lk. 14:34-35

The City on a Hill.

If Christianity is not the salt of the earth or the city on a hill it is useless. The size of the city is not important, what is important is that it is on a hill and shines forth.

Together with Jesus the disciples are already the city on a hill, as the prophets had foretold. Even if the beginnings are small, nonetheless the city of God has already begun to shine forth. And a city set on a hill cannot remain hidden. (Matt. 5:14). The City, the New Eschatological Jerusalem, as the prophet Isaiah says, has a special mission to the nations. Is 2: 2-4: "all the nations shall flow to it ... For out of Zion shall go forth the law and the word of the Lord from Jerusalem." "Which nation has such righteous decrees as all this law?" (cf. Dt.4:6). Is.66: 18-21 adds: "and they shall come and see my glory, ... And some of them also I will take for priests and for Levities, says the Lord".

The new family was to encompass all who accept Jesus' message of the reign of God and thus do the will of God (Mk. 3:35). It was not limited to Jesus' immediate followers alone, but open to all: universalism of space, time, nations. And Jesus' movement of gathering cannot be understood at all apart from this background. It aimed at the true, eschatological Israel in which the social order of the reign of God would be lived. It is true that Jesus never called for a political revolutionary transformation of Jewish society. "Jesus' call for non-violence and renunciation of domination, implies the perspective of a new society."⁸¹

⁸¹ Gerhard Lohfink, Jesus and Community, p.75.

V. ACTS of the APOSTLES.

Acts shows us that the problem of the poor was not a problem at all within the first Christian Communities. According to the Exodus Theology it is God's intention that there be a society in which there are no poor. Now, if God has already sent His Messiah, where should we look for that society if not in the New Testament communities. Through the fact that Jesus' Israel is saved and transformed into a new society in which there are no differences between rich and poor, upper and lower, rule and ruled, Jews and Gentiles, the whole of human society is to be able to join this movement and to eliminate poverty everywhere. The Acts illustrate the correct Christian use of wealth and show the picture of the ideal community. Those who joined them, like Barnabas (Acts 4:36-37), sold a field and gave the money to the Apostles. As the community of brothers and sisters, they were sharing all things in common and selling their possessions and distributing the money to anyone who was in need (Acts 2:44f, 4: 32-34). In Acts, the followers of "the way" include also rich people: an Ethiopian eunuch, who oversaw the treasury of the Ethiopian queen (Acts 8:27); Mary, whose house was a gathering place of the disciples in Jerusalem (Acts 12:12); Lydia, a dealer in purple cloth, a luxury good (Acts 16:14); prominent women in Thessalonica, influential Greek men and women in Beroea (Acts 17:12-13); Priscilla and Aquila, who had the means to act as host to Paul in Corinth (Acts 18:1-11) and who had the resources to travel with Paul to Ephesus and establish a new mission there (Acts 18:18-28). But their riches did not blind them:

- some give alms (Acts 9:36; 10:2)
- others keep their property and money and place it at the disposal of the community (Acts 12:12; 16:14)

"In Acts, sharing everything in common becomes a hallmark of early Christianity (Acts 2:42-47; 4:32-27)."⁸²

But not all were so eager to share their possessions totally with the community; they remained still attached to money: Simon to whom Peter cries "may you and

⁸² Barbara E. Reid, "Reading with Poor", Bible Today, 32, 5, (September, 1989), p.285.

your money rot" (Acts 8:20); Ananias and Sapphira, whose deaths foreshadow the fate that awaits the Christian who remains attached to unrighteous mammon (cf. Acts 5:1-11). Attachment is condemned, good use is accepted. The removal of need, however, is the principal way of living as a member of the poor Church. Paul calls to generosity, organizes help from the Gentile Churches for the church in Jerusalem, which is in need: "They would have us remember the poor" (Gal. 2:10). He saw this economic crisis in the church of Jerusalem as an opportunity to forget the divisions between Jewish and Gentile Christians. Jewish Christians had shared spiritual benefits with Gentiles by bringing the knowledge of Christ, Gentile churches showed their gratitude by sharing their financial blessings to help alleviate the poverty that the Jerusalem Christians were experiencing (Rom. 15:26-27). The New Testament communities recognised Jesus' intentions and at least began to put it into practice. The Christian Church was a community of brothers and sisters, gathering together at the one Eucharist table. What counts is no longer the differences among nations but the fundamental opposition between pagan society and the new society of God.

The ancient church had no structures and strategies for systematic missionary activity. The twelve Apostles preached the Gospel in the whole world and established a sufficient number of local churches. This marked the conclusion of their mission in the strict sense. The communities established by the Apostles existed from then on as a sign of the truth. The pagan society was then in a position to choose. Obviously this did not exclude missionary activity in the period which followed the apostles. But it is evident that Christianity in the pre-Constantinian age achieved its astonishing growth simply through its presence and notability, and not through organised missionary efforts.

If the earliest Christian community called itself the *ekklesia* of God, it must have seen itself as the chosen people of God, the true Israel. Closely related to *ekklesia* is the concept of "the Saints" which also reaches the earliest community in Jerusalem (Acts 9:13, Rom. 15:25; cf. Dn 7:21-27—refer to the eschatological people of God).

The presence of the Spirit which accompanies Jesus' ministry is communicated to the Christians. This coming of the Spirit is an eschatological phenomenon. The

Spirit is described as God's gift to the eschatological community, and even as God's power which truly creates the eschatological Israel (cf. Is.32:15; Ez. 11:19; Joel 3:1-2). Luke, in Acts 2:17-19, cites Joel in his description of the Spirit working in the midst of the eschatological community.

The biblical history of Israel presents the official model of what God does and wants to be done in every nation. One of them is the option for the poor which is proper to God and entrusted to the Christians as a task and mission up to the end of the world: to create again and again the community of brothers and sisters where there will be no poor anymore.

CONCLUSION

We Christians are convinced that Jesus is the Messiah. He proclaimed Isaiah's gospel to the poor. His miraculous meals with his disciples and the crowds of the people who followed him are presented as an eschatological fulfilment of the vision of Israel's festival meals which we find in Deuteronomy. The Acts of the Apostles present the early community of Jerusalem as fulfilling what is written in Deuteronomy: there were no poor among them (Acts 4:34), and there was a system of daily distribution to the widows (Acts 6). But do we really believe that it is possible to eliminate poverty? The fact that there is so much poverty in the world is challenging to us, but we very often consider it as inevitable. Are there, at least some Christians who think that in Christian communities it is not necessary to admit the permanent presence of the poor? At least some who think that the experience of Christians as a society without any poor people could operate as a sign by which poverty could eventually be removed from the world?

We are aware that the life of the nations and not of individual only, is in the hands of a few. They can listen to the cries of the poor and of the victims of the perpetrated poverty since they have a big say on their fortunes. Like Pharo of Exodus, they are challenged to be liberators but they can also chose to continue being oppressors. As in biblical times, the poor remain a reality challenging our fairness, faith, love and generosity. God and the future are on the side of the poor. He made an option for the poor and fulfils it in the history and He invites us to do the same as His Chosen People. But there is not only the temptation of the Church to be a Church of the victors and the powerful, but there is also the temptation to reduce the Gospel to some humanitarian program or economic plan of redistribution, or to identify it with a specific political ideology. The Church brings the good news of what God has done, what God continues to do, and what God will do in the future. Without the Kingdom of God as the ultimate critique of all political and economic systems, it becomes easy to elevate one system or program to ultimacy. The result is idolatry with its eventual repression, violence and death. The Christian brings to working for social justice this "realism" about the human condition and the need for God's action and the Kingdom of God. The

Christian community is more than another political action group or social welfare agency.

Option for the poor is not monopoly of the Bible, but is well known and practised in other religions and cultures, it is the issue of simple humanity, shared by many cultures. It is also wisdom of the nations and powers, because those who did not take care of the poor experience troubles and even collapsing of their systems. The Bible shares in this common exercise of option for the poor as we have seen. It gives all of us the opportunity to collaborate in the option for the poor, in spite of religion or culture.

Before Christians I think there are two tasks left to them by Christ:

1. Sharing in the common practice of option for the poor understand today as Charity, Almsgiving, although we missed something on the way, charity seems more an act of favour, personal goodness or love for the poor which Christians practice, but as in Ancient Near East it was seen as a duty, and that option was seen in the light of justice done to the poor. The act of not helping the poor was seen as a wrong attitude.

In the framework of this option Christians have many ways to help the poor : through the material help, education, taking care for the sick, orphans, widows, street boys... To carry out projects and actions which will bring about improvement of the daily life of people. To teach and to show them ways of coming out of their poverty, to challenge existing structures of oppression, the rich and call for justice and human rights to be respected.

2. What distinct Christian option for the poor from others and is a fulfilment of God's option—to create communities where there is no poverty any more, example and light to others and the way to change the world. Christians as followers of Christ living by His Gospel have a mission of transforming the world into the Kingdom of God. They are to it through their exemplary way of living, loving attitude, active participation in creative work of men, building a just and peaceful world, have a say in all the spheres of the social life: political, economic, cultural. Well exposed Christians who live by Christian values in their daily life can change a lot. Wherever they are they can witness to Christ, they can

promote justice and love, defend the poor and the oppressed and eliminate poverty and hunger from their midst.

From an objective point of view, material poverty is not willed by God, it is not a part of God's plan. Therefore, it represents a contradiction of God's will and this makes it a "social sin".

Jesus referring to the Book of Deuteronomy 15:11, gives us the task for our days: "You have the poor with you always but you will not always have me" (Matt. 26:11). There is always work to be done, or rather we are to continue the work as Messiah started by Jesus in our days. If we truly care for the poor, we will always discover the opportunities to help them. Jesus is to be seen in the poor.

This is not only a practice of solidarity with the poor; it also means being, like Jesus, bearers of the message of hope, that message, which the Bible calls Gospel, the Good News. Jesus was a messenger of this Gospel and we who follow him have to be likewise.

The option for the poor is not something marginal or added on for Christians, it is rather something central to the Church's mission. The remark given by Jesus in the Gospel of Matthew chapter 25 remains basic for Christian ethics forever: "Whatever you have done to the least of my brothers you have done to Me".

Option for the poor is truly Option for Christ.

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