

**Bernard Lonergan and the Preferential Option for the Poor:
Integral Conversion, Liberation Hermeneutics, and the
Mission of the Church**

by

Rohan Michael Curnow

A thesis submitted to the Faculty of Regis College and the Theology Department of the Toronto School of Theology in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Theology awarded by Regis College and the University of Toronto

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Canada

For my Ma and Da, Cheryl and Greg (1946–2004) Curnow

“Remember that you owe your birth to your parents; how can you repay them for what they have done for you?” (Sir 7:28)

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PREVIEW

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PREVIEW

Bernard Lonergan and the Preferential Option for the Poor: Integral Conversion, Liberation Hermeneutics, and the Mission of the Church

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Abstract

This thesis situates the doctrine of the Preferential Option for the Poor within the field of Lonergan Studies. To do so, it draws primarily upon the work of Bernard Lonergan and Robert Doran.

The thesis is divided into five chapters. Chapter 1 begins an historical account of the emergence of the doctrine of the Preferential Option of the Poor. It covers the time period from the opening of the Second Vatican Council in 1962 up until the meeting of the Latin American Episcopal Conference at Puebla, Mexico, in 1979. Chapter 2 continues this narrative, beginning in the period after the Puebla meeting, and illustrates the process by which the doctrine of the Preferential Option of the Poor actually bifurcates into Ecclesial (Roman Magisterium) and theological (Latin American) forms. Chapter 3 introduces the key concepts from Lonergan Studies that are required to appropriate the Preferential Option for the Poor within a critical-realist framework. Chapter 4 employs these concepts, particularly the understanding of conversion outlined in Chapter 3, to situate the Option for the Poor in the framework of Lonergan Studies, and it concurrently engages major Liberation Theologians on the topic of the Option. Chapter 5 uses Doran's theology of history, as outlined in his *Theology and the Dialectics of History*, to move beyond Lonergan Studies in general, and provide a demonstration of the potency of Doran's achievement with respect to the Option for the Poor.

Introduction: Content and Parameters

1 Introduction

Frederick Crowe once noted that the topic of Bernard Lonergan and Liberation Theology might seem like Melchizedek; that is, without contextual father or mother.¹ Indeed, the reception Lonergan's thought received at a 1975 congress in Mexico City illustrated a pronounced divergence in opinion of its relevance to political theology.² Two liberation theologians of some esteem—namely, Hugo Assmann and José Comblin—were unsympathetic towards Lonergan's conception of the theological task.³ However, as Crowe further notes,⁴ the same conference also witnessed an undercurrent of thought that was not only less hostile to Lonergan's thought; it was cautiously optimistic about the relevance his work may hold to the challenges facing Liberation

¹ Frederick E. Crowe, "Bernard Lonergan and Liberation Theology," in *Appropriating the Lonergan Idea*, ed. Michael Vertin (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 1989), 116.

² The proceedings were published as Enrique Ruiz Maldonado, ed. *Liberación y cautiverio: Debates en torno al método de la teología en América Latina* (Ciudad de México: Comité Organizador, 1975).

³ Assmann contended that Lonergan's theology does not lead to history. *Ibid.*, 296. Comblin made two negative assessments: one glib, and the other scathing. The first claimed that if medieval theologians had to engage in the task of theology as Lonergan envisaged it, they would not have stuck at the theological task for even fifteen minutes. The second suggested that Lonergan's thought was made to order for the task of supporting the ideologies of Latin America's juntas and dictatorships. *Ibid.*, 517-19. Ignacio Ellacuría, whose work is often cited in this thesis either directly or via the work of Jon Sobrino, once wrote that subjectivity "is an impoverished sign of what God and man are in history. It has value insofar as it attempts to give an immanent base to God's presence among human beings; but it tends to conceive human transcendence in individual terms, and hence in itself does not lead to praxis in societal life and history." This thesis hopes to allay such fears. Ignacio Ellacuría, *Freedom Made Flesh: The Mission of Christ and His Church*, trans. John Drury (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1976), 92.

⁴ Crowe, "Bernard Lonergan and Liberation Theology," 116-17.

Theology.⁵ In the three decades since the congress, academics such as Robert Doran,⁶ Matthew Lamb,⁷ Frederick Lawrence,⁸ and Stephen Martin⁹ have helped illustrate that Lonergan's thought can in fact shape a potent understanding of progress, decline, and redemption within history. This thesis functions as a contribution—albeit a limited one—made in the same vein as the works by the aforementioned academics.

Specifically, this thesis is an attempt to locate the doctrine of the Preferential Option for the Poor within the field of Lonergan Studies. It is more a work of theological foundations than it is of systematic theology,¹⁰ although by relating the

⁵ Maldonado, ed. *Liberación y cautiverio: Debates en torno al método de la teología en América Latina*, 375, 408, 531-38, and passim.

⁶ Robert M. Doran, *Psychic Conversion and Theological Foundations: Toward a Reorientation of the Human Sciences* (Chico, CA: Scholars Press, 1981); Robert M. Doran, "Theological Grounds for a World-Cultural Humanity," in *Creativity and Method: Essays in Honor of Bernard Lonergan, S.J.* (Milwaukee, WI: Marquette University Press, 1981); Robert M. Doran, "Suffering Servanthood and the Scale of Values," *Lonergan Workshop 4* (1983); Robert M. Doran, "The Analogy of Dialectic and the Systematics of History," in *Religion in Context: Recent Studies in Lonergan*, ed. Timothy P. Fallon and Philip Boo Riley (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1988); Robert M. Doran, *Theology and the Dialectics of History* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1990); Robert M. Doran, *What Is Systematic Theology?* (Toronto: Toronto University Press, 2005).

⁷ Matthew L. Lamb, "Methodology, Metascience and Political Theology," *Lonergan Workshop 2* (1981). And, Matthew L. Lamb, *Solidarity with Victims* (New York: Crossroad, 1982).

⁸ Frederick G. Lawrence, *Communicating a Dangerous Memory: Soundings in Political Theology* (Atlanta, GA: Scholars Press, 1987). And, Frederick G. Lawrence, "Lonergan as Political Theologian," in *Religion in Context: Recent Studies in Lonergan*, ed. Timothy P. Fallon and Philip Boo Riley (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1988).

⁹ Stephen Martin, *Healing and Creativity in Economic Ethics: The Contribution of Bernard Lonergan's Economic Thought to Catholic Social Teaching* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 2008).

¹⁰ This thesis does not engage with Lonergan's economic theory and its focus remains more directly theological. However, as Michael Shute and Gerard Whelan have noted, Lonergan constructed his theology of history—a theology which Doran extends—with his understanding of economic theory in mind. See Michael Shute, "The Origins of Lonergan's Notion of the Dialectic of History: A Study of Lonergan's Early Writings on History, 1933-1938" (Doctor of Theology, Regis College and University of

Preferential Option for the Poor to Lonergan's understanding of the converted subject it does begin to move towards an appropriate 'system of conceptualization' and also towards eradicating inconsistencies in understandings of the Option for the Poor.¹¹ However, in doing so, this thesis does not function as a critique of either Liberation Theology or the stance of the Roman Catholic Magisterium with respect to the Preferential Option for the Poor. Rather, it is a contribution that takes a core doctrine of Liberation Theology, perhaps the core doctrine of Liberation Theology—that is, the doctrine of the Preferential Option for the Poor—and seeks to demonstrate the fecundity of Lonergan Studies as a means of grappling with the full significance of the doctrine and of fully expressing that significance. In this sense, it is a piece of work that will hopefully prove useful to liberation theologians as their field of theology, in the words of Adolfo Nicolás,¹² continues to mature.

Toronto, 1990). And Gerard Whelan, "The Development of Lonergan's Notion of the Dialectic of History: A Study of Lonergan's Writings 1938-53" (Doctor of Philosophy, University of St Michael's College, 1997).

¹¹ For Lonergan, the working-out of such systems of conceptualization belongs to the functional specialization of 'systematics'. See Bernard J. F. Lonergan, *Method in Theology* (London: DLT, 1972), 132.

¹² In his interview with Spanish *El Periodico* on 14 November, 2008, Fr Nicolás defended Liberation Theology by noting that it is a "... courageous and creative response to an unbearable situation of injustice in Latin America." He continued, "As with any theology, it needs years to mature. It's a shame that it has not been given a vote of confidence and that soon its wings will be cut before it learns to fly. It must be given more time." Jordi Casabella, "Adolfo Nicolás: "No sé si abrir fosas y beatificar mártires ayudará a reconciliar"" <http://www.elperiodico.com/es/noticias/sociedad/adolfo-nicolas-abrir-fosas-beatificar-martires-ayudara-reconciliar-34712> (accessed 14-June 2011). The translation is that of the author of this thesis.

2 A Reflection on Poverty

The question of who exactly constitute the poor—or, what exactly constitutes poverty—is of no small significance in any discussion on the Preferential Option for the Poor.¹³ It is an issue with which worker-priest Paul Gauthier and liberation theologian Gustavo Gutiérrez, among others, have struggled.¹⁴ How does Liberation Theology understand poverty? This section clarifies the nature of poverty by: (a) noting that material poverty is always an evil; (b) flagging the fact that the word ‘poverty’ can be employed to denote something positive or negative; and, (c) discussing the existence of a hierarchy of poverty.

Firstly, there exists a question of whether material poverty—the lack of goods required for human existence—is an evil or whether it is a virtue. It may seem unusual to suggest any positive value to such deprivation, but Gutiérrez notes that some Christians have a tendency to view material poverty as a positive human and religious ideal.¹⁵ This approach, according to Gutiérrez, however well intentioned, must be discarded. Otherwise, those people who seek to free themselves from subjugation to material deprivation are seeking an anti-Christian goal. Gutiérrez considers such a proposition unacceptable and argues that therefore all material poverty, in the sense of

¹³ Employing an adjective (such as ‘poor’) as a noun is usually considered incorrect. However, the phrase ‘the poor’ is used prolifically within much theological reflection and as such the terminology holds a precise theological provenance (such as the Hebrew *anawim*). For this reason, the usage of ‘the poor’ is perpetuated in this thesis.

¹⁴ Paul Gauthier, *Christ, the Church, and the Poor*, trans. Edward Fitzgerald (Westminster, MD: The Newman Press, 1965), 15-51. Gustavo Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation: History, Politics, and Salvation*, trans. Caridad Inda and John Eagleson (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1988), 163-73.

¹⁵ Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation: History, Politics, and Salvation*, 163.

the deprivation of the goods required to exist, must unambiguously be denounced as an evil.

Secondly, the term 'poverty' itself can be employed to connote something either positive or negative. For example, the terms 'spiritual poverty' and 'cultural poverty' can both be employed in positive and negative senses. Spiritual poverty, in the sense of its usage in the phrase 'the poor in spirit' does indeed connote a virtue.¹⁶ Moreover, cultural poverty in the sense Cardinal Lercaro employed the idea is also a positive.

Giuseppe Alberigo writes that Lercaro

proposed the Church's need for cultural poverty, obviously not in the sense of ignorance, but rather as a renunciation of the covetous possession of a finished and closed conceptual system. The Church would, instead, place itself in a posture of openness toward all cultures as equally capable of receiving the gospel message and widening the horizons of faith.¹⁷

This use of the term 'cultural poverty' can be seen in the positive light as a call for the Church to make the shift from a normative understanding of culture to one which is

¹⁶ Gutiérrez, drawing on the documents of Medellín, refers to this form of poverty as what is intended by the word preference in the phrase 'Preferential Option for the Poor': this is the element of Christian spirituality that allows us to recognize God as God and all others as siblings. Gustavo Gutiérrez, "Option for the Poor: Reviews and Challenges," *Promotio Justitiae*:57 (1994): 14. See also, Gustavo Gutiérrez, *The Truth Shall Make You Free: Confrontations*, trans. Matthew O'Connell (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1990), 161.

¹⁷ Giuseppe Alberigo, *A Brief History of Vatican II*, trans. Matthew Sherry (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2006), 80.

empirical.¹⁸ These uses of the term poverty in a positive sense conflict with John Paul II's use in *Centesimus annus*, where he writes, employing the same terminology: “[the] Option [for the Poor] is not limited to material poverty, since it is well known that there are many other forms of poverty, especially in modern society—not only economic but cultural and spiritual poverty as well (§57).”¹⁹ So it is that ‘cultural’ and ‘spiritual’ poverty may refer to virtuous dispositions or to privations. The context will usually clarify which sense is intended. In liberation thought, as in John Paul II's thought, the usage is normally in the sense of a privation. And this is the sense in which the term is employed throughout this thesis.

Thirdly, there is a question of a hierarchy of privation with respect to poverty: how do liberation theologians relate the different kinds of poverty? For example, as already noted, John Paul II refers to cultural and spiritual poverty as well as to the materially deprived.²⁰ Furthermore, Benedict XVI also calls for material, cultural, moral, affective, and spiritual poverty to be fought in attempts to establish peace on earth.²¹ How do the different kinds of poverty relate to each other? John Paul II,

¹⁸ For an outline of such a shift, see Bernard J. F. Lonergan, “The Transition from a Classicist World-View to Historical Mindedness,” in *A Second Collection: Papers by Bernard J. F. Lonergan, S.J.*, ed. William F. Ryan and Bernard Tyrrell (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1996), 1-9.

¹⁹ Pope John Paul II, “Centesimus annus”
http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_01051991_centesimus-annus_en.html (accessed 3-April 2009).

²⁰ *Ibid.*, §57.

²¹ Pope Benedict XVI, “Message of His Holiness Pope Benedict XVI for the Celebration of the World Day of Peace: Fighting Poverty to Build Peace”
http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/benedict_xvi/messages/peace/documents/hf_ben-xvi_mes_20061208_xl-world-day-peace_en.html (accessed 17-May 2010).

relatively early in his Pontificate, suggested that spiritual poverty is in fact worse than material poverty. He wrote, "Because poor are those who lack material resources, but more so are those not familiar with the way God marks for them, who do not have his adopted Son, who ignore the moral path which leads to the joyous eternal destiny to which God calls humanity."²² Benedict XVI has likewise written that, "As Blessed Teresa of Calcutta frequently observed, the worst poverty is not to know Christ."²³ Such stances can be contrasted with the writings of liberation theologians, who acknowledge that there are a range of situations that can be defined as poverty,²⁴ but insist on a certain priority for economic poverty. For them, material poverty is not the only form of oppression, but it is foundational. As Clodovis Boff notes, "[the poor] do not simply exist alongside the other oppressed, like the black, the Indian, or the woman. ... A black taxi driver and a black soccer star are not the same thing. Similarly, a female domestic servant and the first lady of the land are not the same. An Indian whose land

²² Pope John Paul II, "Celebración de la palabra: Homilía del Santo Padre Juan Pablo II" http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/homilies/1984/documents/hf_jp-ii_hom_19841012_celebrazione-santo-domingo_sp.html (accessed 5-April 2009). The original Spanish reads, "Porque pobre es quien carece de recursos materiales, pero más aún quien desconoce el camino que Dios le marca, quien no tiene su filiación adoptiva, quien ignora la senda moral que conduce al feliz destino eterno al que Dios llama al hombre" (§4).

²³ Pope Benedict XVI, "Message of his Holiness Benedict XVI for Lent 2006" http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/benedict_xvi/messages/lent/documents/hf_ben-xvi_mes_20050929_lent-2006_en.html (accessed 14-June 2011).

²⁴ Virgilio Elizondo, "Culture, the Option for the Poor, and Liberation," in *The Option for the Poor in Christian Theology*, ed. Daniel G. Groody (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2007), 157-68. Gustavo Gutiérrez, "The Option for the Poor Arises from Faith in Christ," *Theological Studies* 70:2 (2009): 322.

is stolen and an Indian still in possession of it are not the same.”²⁵ Not only does material poverty mean “death,”²⁶ but it also is usually concomitant with a lack of access to cultural, social and political goods.²⁷ Material poverty can cause cultural poverty and it places acute pressures on the spiritual life. Here it is sufficient to note that Liberation Theology prioritizes material poverty while acknowledging, and also seeking to overcome, other forms of privation on both cultural and spiritual levels.

Jon Sobrino develops a phenomenology of bread—a concept which is referred to a number of times in this thesis—that can illustrate Liberation Theology’s stance on the idea of a hierarchy of poverty. Speaking of the basic goods required for life as the foundation of the Reign (or Kingdom) of God,²⁸ he argues that life is always open to more. Life points always to a fuller life, to being more than merely existing. Bread, he contends, is food. But it is not only food. It is also activity and toil, that is, it is work. Moreover, bread needs to be shared within a local community, and for other groups, and so becomes the focus of a spirit of community. It moves into the cultural realm in the festival of maize where poetry, art, and singing occur and bread also has something of the sacramental about what it conveys. Bread means the possibility of life, and the

²⁵ Clodovis Boff, *Theology and Praxis: Epistemological Foundations* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1987), 77.

²⁶ Gutiérrez, “Option for the Poor: Reviews and Challenges,” 15.

²⁷ Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation: History, Politics, and Salvation*, 163.

²⁸ The terms ‘Kingdom of God’ and ‘Reign of God’ are used interchangeably in this thesis. No differentiation of meaning is intended when either term is used.

possibility of life in all its fullness.²⁹ So Sobrino argues that the religious life begins with bread. The material life is the germ of a fuller life, and this is precisely why Liberation Theology speaks of integral liberation: social, cultural, and spiritual liberation are only possible if life exists.³⁰

Poverty is a complex phenomenon and as Sobrino argues there is no need to “develop a chemically pure concept of poverty as a genus to be divided, according to the old logic, into distinct species.”³¹ Rather, “the generic term ‘poverty,’ with all its historical fluidity, is irreplaceable as an expression of the denial and oppression of humanness, and expression of the need, the contempt, the voicelessness, and anonymity that millions of human beings have suffered.”³² But the reflections in this introduction do serve to add some clarity to the usage of the term poverty. Material poverty is always an evil. And while the term poverty can be used to denote something positive, the sense in which it is *usually* employed by liberation theologians and in papal encyclicals is as referring to a privation. Liberation Theology does prioritize material poverty,³³ but it does so out of a concern to avoid cultural and spiritual poverty.

²⁹ Jon Sobrino, “Central Position of the Reign of God in Liberation Theology,” in *Mysterium Liberationis: Fundamental Concepts of Liberation Theology*, ed. Ignacio Ellacuría and Jon Sobrino (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1993), 380-81.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 381.

³¹ Jon Sobrino, “Depth and Urgency of the Option for the Poor,” in *No Salvation Outside the Poor: Prophetic-Utopian Essays* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2008), 23-24.

³² *Ibid.*, 24.

³³ It is outside the ambit of this thesis to conclusively establish the nature of the biblical understanding of poverty. What should be noted here, however, is that the eminent biblical scholar,

Liberation Theology seeks the integral liberation of the poor from all oppression, whether spiritual, cultural, or material.

3 Thesis Structure

Chapters 1 and 2 of this thesis contain an historical account of the process by which the doctrine of the Preferential Option for the Poor emerged in Catholic thought. Chapter 1, specifically, focuses on the initial ecclesial impetus for development and traces the process from Vatican II—particularly the Group of the Church of the Poor’s ideas at the Council—through a period of tentative support from the Roman Magisterium, until the Latin American Episcopal Conference’s (*Consejo Episcopal Latinoamericano* or CELAM) affirmation of an Option for the Poor at its meeting in Puebla, Mexico, 1979.

Chapter 2 of this thesis continues to trace the trajectory of development of the doctrine of the Preferential Option for the Poor. It recounts what is identified in this thesis as the ‘Bifurcation of the Preferential Option for the Poor’. That is, Chapter 2 contains an account of the process by which the Preferential Option for the Poor splits into two distinct forms: an ecclesial form adopted by the Roman Magisterium—particularly John Paul II and Joseph Ratzinger (the latter’s thought is treated both in his

Benedictine Jacques Dupont, argues that Jesus’ original addressees of the Reign of God are the materially poor. This is not a focus that is in opposition to Matthew’s emphasis on ‘the poor in spirit’ as a spiritual disposition, but rather the foundation upon which Matthew’s stance is built. See Jacques Dupont, “Introduction aux Béatitudes,” *Nouvelle Revue Theologique* 108:2 (1976): 97-108.

capacity as the Cardinal Prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith and as Pope Benedict XVI)—and a theological form as adopted by liberation theologians such as Gustavo Gutiérrez and Jon Sobrino. The stance of CELAM, it is identified, has tended to function as a middle-term between the Vatican and theological positions and in doing so confirms the bifurcation of the Option for the Poor.

Chapter 3 of this thesis introduces the thought of Bernard Lonergan and Lonergan scholar Robert Doran. Specifically, it focuses on the subject in her integrity.³⁴ That is, it introduces Lonergan’s appropriation of the philosophical ‘turn to the subject’ and his focus on conversion. This third chapter: (1) summarizes Lonergan’s theory of conscious intentionality and introduces his understanding of patterns of experience and realms of meaning; (2) presents Lonergan’s understanding of the horizon of the subject; and, (3) sets forth Lonergan and Doran’s combined stance on religious, moral, intellectual and psychic conversion.

Chapter 4 employs Lonergan’s understanding of the subject to facilitate an understanding of the Preferential Option for the Poor as it was detailed in the historical analysis of Chapters 1 and 2. Chapter 4 contains an answer to the question: how might one understand the Option for the Poor from Lonergan-Doran’s perspective on the fourfold conversion of the subject? In constructing an answer to this question, the chapter also focuses on how conversion, initiated by divine grace, overcomes bias—in

³⁴ With respect to issues of inclusive language and gender, in this thesis, the original language of any quoted author is preserved even in instances where such language is considered outdated. The present author, however, adopts the practice of writing in a manner that alternates between feminine and masculine pronouns rather than adopting periphrastics such as ‘him or her’ or ‘she or he’.

its egoistic, collective, general-intellectual, and psychic-affective forms—in history and how this process relates to the Option for the Poor.

Chapter 5 of this thesis is concentrated more narrowly upon the issue of the Preferential Option for the Poor and the mission of the Church. That is, if Chapter 4 treated conversion and the Option for the Poor more broadly, Chapter 5 is focused more specifically on an instance of great importance to Liberation Theology: the development of a systematic account of the Reign of God that is able to guide the mission of the Church in a manner that incorporates the Preferential Option for the Poor. To illustrate the capabilities of Lonergan Studies to meet such an exigence, in this final chapter the theology of history developed by Doran in his *Theology and the Dialectics of History* is elucidated. This theology of history is then related to the issue of the mission of the Church in terms of hermeneutics and praxis, terms that are integral to the theological understanding of the Preferential Option for the Poor.

PREVIEW