
« PREFERENTIAL OPTION FOR THE POOR »



It was Luke the Evangelist who recorded Jesus' first preaching. It was at Nazareth, and this first preaching did not leave anyone indifferent. After having read from Isaiah, Jesus said to his listeners: *"Today this scripture passage is fulfilled in your hearing"* (Lk. 4:21). What was the passage quoted? *"The spirit of the Lord is upon me; therefore he has anointed me, he has sent me to bring glad tidings to the poor, to proclaim liberty to captives, recovery of sight to the blind and release to prisoners. To announce a year of favour from the Lord"* (Lk. 4:18-19). Imagine the effect this would produce today if Jesus repeated these words in a homeless shelter, a house of correction, a penitentiary, or to the deaf and the blind. One would simply not believe one's ears, nor one's eyes. Yet, it is for the most badly off that the Lord has come.

COMMITMENT TO THE POOR

The youth of the world have been invited by Pope John Paul II to meet with him in Toronto for the seventeenth World Youth Day. They haven't been invited as tourists or to a convention or sports event. They have been invited to Toronto to witness to their faith in Christ, to share about their faith and solemnly *celebrate it, but also to build up their Church and commit themselves to their needy brothers and sisters.* *"In his discourse on the last judgement, Jesus does not limit himself to drawing our attention to those in difficulty. He identifies with and associates himself to them. 'Truly, truly I tell you, each time that you have done it to the least of these my brothers and sisters, you have done it to me.'* These words of Jesus have deeply marked the lives of his disciples to this very day." From Jesus to John Paul II, from the Old Testament prophets to our own day, the great heralds of the Word of God have not ceased calling all people who have been wounded or kept away, to the table of man. *"The rich person's surplus is the poor person's need,"* Saint Augustine said. And Saint Basil said: *"Man is the steward of his goods, and not the owner."* The Church has summed up this heritage and project in an expression having important consequences: A preferential option for the poor.

JUSTICE

The first hymn I composed was simply titled "Justice". It was only a recap of the courageous expression of Saint Basil. The earth belongs to all, but all must watch over it. Social and actual inequalities are an outrage against God's plan. Justice is God's path as well as that of humankind, the path to God as well as the cry of God on behalf of the poor. *"Justice for our brothers and sisters, justice for the peoples of the world, voice of God, cry of the heart, justice for my brother and sister."* – without forgetting the youth! *"The bread you hoard is your brother's, your sister's; accomplish the works of justice and peace. To the poor belong the riches you accumulate: accomplish works of justice and peace. What you leave to be spoiled is the poor's: accomplish works of justice and peace. To the one who owns the cloak you have hidden, accomplish works of justice and peace. Free the oppressed, and give voice to the voiceless. Accomplish deeds of justice and peace."*

"GO, FREE MY PEOPLE!"

I think that it was the same year that I wrote another song, "Go, Free My People". I was in the mountains, and I didn't want to lose the tune that was coursing through my mind – but I nearly lost my way! From the deepest level of love shown to God and to our brothers and sisters – as it was with Moses – arises this daunting

mission: Confirm your brothers and sisters in the faith and in freedom." *"Go, Free my people, free my brothers and sisters, do not fear, I am with you. My people suffer humiliation: who will free them? Your brothers and sisters are bent under oppression, who will bring them reassurance? Crushed under, my people are falling: who will there be to lift them up? Brothers and sisters cry out their affliction, who is there to console them? Hungry, my people are fasting: who is there to feed them? Insulted, your brother and sisters talk: who will come to hear them?"*

LORD, YOUR PEOPLE

Another song of the Alpec Group expressed even more so our social reality, challenged me with the words of Jesus and reminded me that far from turning us away from our earthly responsibilities, our faith moves us to work with assurance and hope for real justice: *"Lord, your people, like a child, look up to you. In the depth of their suffering, your people stretch their arms to you. Lord, you are our hope and our rock. If in the thick of its rebellion your people lift their arms to you, Lord, you are our justice and unity. So weak and frail, your people reach out to you, our assurance and our rampart. So poor in its language, your people reach out to you, Lord our inheritance and our treasure. Worried in its prayer, your people reach out to you, Lord our trust and our help."*

HOLY WEEK

Throughout this Holy Week I urge you to be very attentive to the poor and the unhappy among us. We must think of the One who was crucified for us, but he invites us to look at the crucified of our times, to look at those who are excluded, marginalised, impoverished, of no account. And it is not necessary to go very far to meet them. It may even be that they are members of our families and our communities. How I wish that Easter would be for all our brothers and sisters the great feast of return to life, the great feast of Easter joy which takes us from death to life. The Spirit who alighted on Jesus can work these great wonders in us, too. Through us today, Jesus wants to bring the Good News to the poor, proclaim freedom to captives and sight to the blind, free the oppressed, and proclaim a year of grace from the Lord. May these holy days keep us watchful and attentive to the needy, and may we keep in our hearts and in our Church this preferential option for the poor. May the word of God be accomplished even today!

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