

Robert K. Vischer

## From Principle to Policy

### The Option for the Poor in Christian Theology

Edited by Daniel G. Groody  
University of Notre Dame Press, \$35, 328 pp.

### United States Welfare Policy A Catholic Response

Thomas J. Massaro, SJ  
Georgetown University Press, \$26.95, 257 pp.

Two fears can make Catholics wary of faith-based arguments about economic policy. First is the fact that policy questions turn on the exercise of prudential judgment rather than bright-line moral absolutes. It is easy to draw lines in the abortion debate based on the church's teaching; it is significantly more difficult to draw such lines when the debate concerns the most effective way to address poverty. Bishops may deny Communion to a prochoice politician, but can one imagine them doing the same to an economist? Second, in light of this uncertainty, efforts to connect the church's teaching to specific economic policies are often viewed more as partisan posturing than faithful discipleship, exacerbating a fear that too much noise about the political here-and-now may drown out the gospel's proclamation of a world to come. This charge beset mainline Protestants who emphasized the "Social Gospel" in the late nineteenth century, and some members of the Catholic hierarchy revived it in their skeptical engagement with liberation theologians, whom they accused of overemphasizing "liberation from servitude of an earthly and temporal kind."

Two new books embody the type of Catholic scholarship that can help allay these worries. The essays collected in *The Option for the Poor in Christian Theology* explore the preferential option as a central dimension of Christian theology. The theological analysis propounded in these

essays shows that the option for the poor is not a Sermon on the Mount-inspired add-on to the Christian worldview, but rather a basic tenet that permeates every aspect of that worldview. David Tracy characterizes it as the vehicle by which to assess the Christian understanding of the relationship between love and justice. "Love is too insubstantial," he explains, "if its demand for equality does not include the demand for justice for all rendered unequal, the poor."

The Second Coming of Christ looms large in the essays, signifying, in Tracy's view, "the radical 'not yet' of the apocalyptic." Matthew Ashley describes the Second Coming as the means by which "hope might be articulated in a history that offers [the poor] so little in which to hope," and shows how our belief in the Second Coming shapes other Christian beliefs and their relationship to our treatment of the poor. The Incarnation, for example, reflects that "prior to that time when all things are one in Christ," God has taken sides in this earthly conflict on behalf of the oppressed. Other essays reveal how the option for the poor links action to Christian memory. Gustavo Gutiérrez reminds us that memory in the Bible "goes beyond the conceptual; it points toward a conduct, a practice designed to transform reality," and that

"the most important content of the memory that indicates the path for the community of Jesus' disciples" is the "free and gratuitous love of God." Christians, Gutiérrez asserts, are called "to be a sign of that love in history."

No collection of essays is uniformly insightful, and this one includes several whose emphases strike me as misguided—defining poverty to include virtually every human being living today, for instance, or suggesting that true evangelism must be directed not to non-Christians but to "the Mammon-worshippers who create poverty." On balance, though, the volume lends helpful theological heft to the church's stance toward the poor. Nevertheless, faithful Christians who find ample common ground in recognizing poverty's importance may close this book still disagreeing on virtually every public-policy implication. Figuring out the law's response to poverty is a tricky proposition; a Christian worldview does not come ready-made with competency in the realm of statistics, which is where any helpful analysis of economic policy must eventually lead. And so we may be tempted to place economic policy outside the reach of moral judgment. We can articulate the principles, but the real-world applications sometimes seem up for grabs.

In *United States Welfare Policy: A Catholic Response*, Thomas Massaro, SJ, attempts to overcome this problem by integrating the church's teaching on economic justice with a clear-eyed as-



"So far I've collected twenty-three dollars and six cell phones."

assessment of the impact of welfare reform. He focuses on the 1996 law that changed welfare by imposing stricter work requirements and time limits, and by devolving responsibility to the states through block grants. In recounting the role of Catholic voices in the welfare debate, Massaro documents the church's repeated contention "that the proper focus of social policy should be on fighting poverty, not solely on reducing welfare rolls and program costs." In his view, the two most important developments from 1996 to 2006 are "a massive decline in the welfare caseload across the nation and modest (though temporary) progress in reducing poverty rates."

Displaying an impressive command of the relevant statistics, Massaro notes that the impact of welfare reform in times of economic downturn remains unclear. This does not preclude him from drawing some tentative conclusions. He argues that placing absolute time limits on welfare is unjust. In his view, society's interest in making welfare a temporary aid to families in trouble is not itself illegitimate; but Catholic social teaching's philosophical commitment to the principle that "ought implies can" dictates that "people must not be asked to do the impossible." Accordingly, he suggests that those who meet objective hardship qualifications—medical conditions, family crises, economic recession—should be exempted from the time limits. At the same time, and more hopefully, he asserts that connecting welfare to work holds promise for our treatment of the poor. If welfare reform is intended to help recipients meet society's expectations, we now have the opportunity and the obligation to show that we are serious about empowering the poor through child care, family leave, and other work supports. In time, Massaro believes, the stereotype should disappear and welfare lose its stigma.

Massaro's holistic reliance on theology, political narrative, and an assessment of the law's measurable human impact contributes to a fuller picture of welfare reform than that available in most accounts. His book serves as a needed corollary to *The Option for the Poor* in

*Christian Theology*. The theologians can help us figure out why economic justice matters in a Christian worldview, but they have a harder time helping us figure out what it looks like. That part of the inquiry is an inescapably fact-intensive effort, and those who are comfortable constructing moral frameworks tend to be distinctly less comfortable wading through mountains of empirical data. Our economic life may elude bright-line moral pronouncements, but it cannot

escape moral judgment completely. If the option for the poor is going to shape our world, then theologians and social scientists need each other. These two books, read together, suggest what that collaboration could look like. ■

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**PANELISTS**

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Don Wycliff, University of Notre Dame; former editorial page editor and public editor for the *Chicago Tribune*.

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