

# What Is Discipleship?

The Christian vocation is simple: It is to follow the example and the teaching of Jesus. Following him leads to the way of his cross, where his followers are invited to share in the pouring out of his life for others—that is, in his suffering, death, and ultimately his Resurrection. A life of Gospel witness proclaims the “Good News” that all are loved. A disciple or follower of Jesus is first called to know him, to follow him, and to experience a profound mystery of God’s love. Christian discipleship is based on the new law of love that embraces the whole human family and knows no limits. Why? Because in the Gospels, Jesus proclaims a salvation that extends “to the ends of the earth” (Acts of the Apostles 1:8).

In the acceptance of the new law of love, every Christian is called in the name of Jesus to witness to the dignity of every human person, to foster the vocation of every human person, and to live in respectful relationship to and within the whole human community. To follow Jesus as a disciple demands a faith that trusts totally in God’s plan for the salvation of all, a hope that empowers difficult practical decisions and sustains a perseverance that moves society toward a more just world, and ultimately a love that makes all members of humankind truly brothers and sisters (see the *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church*, 3).

In 1971 the College of Catholic Bishops articulated a strong statement that the pursuit of social justice on earth is at the heart of the Gospel message and the mission of the Church: “Action on behalf of justice and participation in the transformation of the world fully appears to us as a constitutive dimension of preaching of the Gospel, or, in other words, of the Church’s mission for the redemption of the human race and its liberation from every oppressive situation” (*Justice in the World*, 6). The key word in their statement is *constitutive*. In their bold statement, the bishops argue that there can be no living or preaching of the Gospel message that does not follow through with “action on behalf of justice.” This clearly means that we are not following the example and teaching of Jesus if we have no care or concern to liberate others “from every oppressive situation.”

John Paul II not only reaffirmed this position of the 1971 Synod of Bishops but also developed it. He emphasized that “action on behalf of justice” is essential to the mission of the Church. He proclaimed “concern for human beings, for their humanity, for the future of the human race on earth and therefore also for the direction of the totality of development and progress—to be inextricably linked to the Church’s own mission and an essential element of it” (*Redemptor Hominis*, 15). Both of these statements are important in the more recent development of Catholic social teaching, for they offer a new manner of interpreting the Gospel and explain in a more profound way what it means to be a disciple of Jesus. In today’s world the Gospel is not about preserving the current social order. Rather, for the sake of, and out of love for, one’s neighbor, the Gospel demands that the followers of Jesus work together for social change.

In the twenty-first century, the power of the Gospel message and the mission of the Church marvelously merge in wholehearted commitment to the struggle for human dignity—that is, for greater human freedom and for liberation of those oppressed by poverty, exploitation, and abuse of any kind. This means that those who follow Jesus must take responsibility for all aspects of human development and progress. Any scientific, economic, military, or social progress that oppresses human persons rather than liberates them must be critiqued, challenged, and changed. This implies, of course, that those who do so must be competent to address the ever more complicated and technical issues that shape our world.

An important step toward further understanding of what it means to follow Jesus in today’s world is the emergence of a new concept: “the preferential option for the poor.” This phrase was first used by the Latin American bishops in 1979, and the U.S. bishops identified it as a central feature of their 1986 pastoral letter *Economic Justice for All*. And again, in his 1987 encyclical *On Social Concerns*, Pope John Paul II developed this same concept of “a preferential option for the poor.” This means the “rightness” of



social structures, of economic policy, and of ever increasing military investment must all be examined from the perspective of the poor, the marginalized, and the powerless. As members of society, we must always ask questions about the decisions made by those in positions of responsibility for society. How do specific policies or administrative structures affect children, the aged, the sick, single mothers, immigrants, refugees, minorities, the homeless, victims of natural disasters, victims of war, and the peoples of underdeveloped poor nations of the world, for example?

In order to answer this question, Pope John Paul II teaches it is first necessary to “stand with the poor”; that is, explicitly and experientially, he invites the followers of Jesus to cross the bridge that separates the wealthy few from the massive majority on suffering and forgotten margins. One must always listen to them and in some way share in their experience. John Paul II suggests that only in this way can one learn how the poor are affected by the decisions of political or economic powers. He boldly proclaims that the follower of Jesus must experience the suffering of the poor in order to know how “to organize socio-economic life . . . in such a way that it will tend to bring about equality between people, rather than putting a yawning gap between them” (“Address to Bishops of Brazil,” 1980, 135).

For those in the United States, this first means the widespread cultural bias toward the rich must be overcome. In the United States, economic policy, politics, media, and ambition are built on worship of the “rich and famous.” Action for social justice must be countercultural, giving priority and attention to the poor. This priority runs counter to the so-called American dream that emphasizes wealth, power, and individualism, but it moves toward the heart of the Gospel message of simplicity, humility, and solidarity.

It is not that poor people are better than rich people; it is rather that the world’s poor live in misery, and their basic human needs are not met. John Paul II connects “preferential option for the poor” and “action for social justice” when he speaks of the “duty of solidarity.” Solidarity is “the shared and multilateral commitment toward effective action” that will change the economic, social, cultural, and political “ways of doing things” that perpetuate the structures that oppress the poor and marginalize the weak. According to John Paul II, new inclusive structures and new forms of cooperation are necessary so that the poor may participate in decisions that affect them.

Solidarity with the poor, the Pope writes, is not a “vague feeling of compassion or shallow distress at the misfortunes of so many people, both near and far.” On the contrary,” he writes, “it is a firm and persevering determination to commit oneself to the common good; that is to say, to the good of all and of each individual because we are all really responsible for all.” This demands that the followers of Jesus oppose unrestrained “desire for profit” and “thirst for power.” They are called for “commitment to the good of one’s neighbor with the readiness, in the Gospel sense, to ‘lose oneself’ for the sake of the other instead of exploiting him, and to ‘serve him’ instead of oppressing him for one’s own advantage.” Only in fidelity to the Gospel way of love for and service of one’s neighbor can evil mechanisms and structures of sin that oppress and marginalize the poor at home and in the developing nations of the world be overcome (*Sollicitudo Rei Socialis*, 1987, 38).

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