



## THE JESUIT, THE POPE AND THE POOR

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Since the first Jesuit pope's election earlier this year, the words "poverty" and "the poor" have acquired fresh resonance inside and outside the Catholic Church. Of course the Catholic Church has always devoted special attention to the materially poor and otherwise suffering. And with Pope Francis, one senses he is the real deal regarding poverty. There is not a trace of champagne socialist or middle-class lefty about the man.

But Francis isn't the first to have used the phrase "a poor church of the poor." It's also been employed in a positive fashion by figures ranging from the father of liberation theology, Gustavo Gutiérrez, to critics of Marxist-versions of the same theology. In a 2011 meeting with German Catholic lay associations, for instance, Benedict XVI [challenged](#) the very wealthy—and notoriously bureaucratized—German Church to embrace poverty. By this, Benedict meant the Church detaching itself from "worldliness" in order to achieve "liberation from material and political burdens and privileges," thereby breaking free of the institutional-maintenance mindset that plagues contemporary German Catholicism and opening itself "in a truly Christian way to the whole world."

Going back in time, it was another pope, Blessed John XXIII, who brought the term "the church of the poor" to prominence. But as far as unpacking its meaning is concerned, perhaps the first to do so was one of the twentieth-century's best Catholic theologians, the Jesuit Jean Daniélou (1905-1974). Understanding how important the expression would be after Vatican II, Daniélou devoted a chapter in his 1965 book, [L'Oraison, problème politique](#) (Prayer as a Political Problem), to clarifying the meaning of "*l'église des pauvres*."

Daniélou brought unique perspectives and experiences to this question. The son of a politician from an anti-clerical family (who wasn't baptized until his twenties) and an aristocratic mother (a formidable Catholic intellectual in her own right), Daniélou was famed for his independence of thought. When many French Catholics opted for Marshal Pétain and Vichy in 1940, for example, Daniélou chose Charles de Gaulle and Free France. Viewed with suspicion before Vatican II, Daniélou served as a *peritus* at the 21st ecumenical council because of his contribution to reviving patristic studies.

After 1965, Daniélou—like his fellow Jesuit Henri de Lubac—emerged as a champion of Catholic orthodoxy. From the late-1960s onwards, his articles were published regularly in *L'Osservatore Romano*. In these pieces, Daniélou assailed (to name just a few) what he called "[horizontalism](#)" (that which reduces Christianity to what Francis aptly describes as NGO-ism); those who equated the Church's hierarchy with "[repression](#)," as well as theologians who argued for an oxymoronic "[atheistic Christianity](#)." Daniélou also proved very willing, like de Lubac, to defend *Humanae Vitae*. Extremely knowledgeable of Islam and Eastern religions (his brother Alain was a leading Indologist) and an interfaith dialoguer before it became fashionable, Daniélou was censorious of those who thought interreligious conversations implied an end to Christian evangelization.

What, however, *really* riled his critics were Daniélou's sharp criticisms of the paths taken by many religious orders after 1965. In a famous 1972 Vatican Radio [interview](#), Daniélou suggested that some orders had become "decadent." This manifested itself, he stated, in several trends. One was the reduction of Christianity to social and political activism. Another was the embrace of the absurdity—propagated, most notably, by Karl Rahner S.J.—that human nature itself was somehow in a permanent state of flux: a claim for which Rahner provided no evidence whatsoever (because there is none).

Naturally there was a price to be paid for such outspokenness. Daniélou was ostracized by some in his own order and scorned by less-accomplished theologians. For someone who as a member of the French Resistance had faced down Nazis, theological brickbats were a rather trivial affair. Moreover there were plenty who recognized Daniélou's intellectual achievements. Made a cardinal by Paul VI in 1969, Daniélou was [elected](#) three years later to the very secular, very prestigious *Académie française*.

But as if to temper the effects of such accolades, Daniélou had been quietly intensifying his own work for the despised of this world. Very few knew that Daniélou had always engaged in ministry to those on society's



margins, precisely because—like one Jorge Bergoglio S.J.—Daniélou kept his work with the poor out of public view.

At the end of his life, Daniélou was living in a run-down convent in Paris, possessing neither secretarial help nor even a car. And the cardinal was to die in circumstances that were, by worldly standards, humiliating. He suffered a heart attack in the stairway of a Parisian prostitute's house in a disreputable part of town to the north of the Boulevard des Batignolles. This led to decades of catty remarks (such as those found in Hans Küng's memoirs) by some of those with whom Daniélou had clashed after Vatican II. It was later proved there had been nothing untoward about Daniélou's presence in the house. The cardinal had in fact been bringing the lady in question money to bail her husband out of prison.

Yet for all his willingness to aid the distressed, Daniélou was no "pauperist." He refused to romanticize material deprivation. Nor did Daniélou have any patience with quasi-Marxist interpretations of Biblical treatments of poverty. While happy to converse with avowed Communists, Daniélou didn't hesitate to describe Marxism and atheistic humanism more generally as an ["outlandish error."](#)

So who, according to Daniélou, are "the poor"? Reflecting on this expression, Daniélou illustrates how it carries several meanings in the Gospels. One was the burdened and afflicted, material or otherwise. But the core meaning, according to Daniélou, is found in Christ's actions. And this was to reach out to people of "all categories" who knew they were "poor in spirit:" i.e., those humble enough to recognize their inadequacy and sinfulness and willing to "risk all" for the healing and truth proclaimed by and embodied in Christ. This, Daniélou writes, is the church of the poor.

Daniélou then observes that the Gospels show Christ welcoming such people from *all* sectors of society. They weren't just tax-collectors but also, Daniélou notes, prominent figures in Jewish life such as Nicodemus. From this standpoint, Daniélou maintains, the term "the poor" paradoxically underscores the *universality* of Christ's message. Why? Because, Daniélou stresses, it was precisely because the Christian church modeled Christ's behavior by making itself "open to all" that the early Christians were regarded with contempt by the leaders of the pagan sects that proliferated throughout the Roman Empire. For them, religion was all about esoteric mysteries accessible only to small elites. Hence they were suspicious of any religion that explicitly appealed to "the masses."

Incidentally, Daniélou's analysis fits with subsequent studies of Christianity's emergence in the ancient world by the sociologist of religion, Rodney Stark. His 1996 book [The Rise of Christianity](#) provided compelling evidence that the popular notion that the early Christians were somehow limited to the Roman Empire's proletariat is—like most popular notions—less-than accurate.

Yes, some early Christians were slaves and outcasts. Stark, however, suggests that far more Christians came from rather different social contexts. Examining a range of evidence, for example, Stark illustrates that vast numbers of early Christians belonged to well-educated, Hellenized Jewish families who made their living from commerce. Demographically-speaking, Stark adds, the early Christians were heavily located in trading cities around the Mediterranean. Their involvement in business gave them unique opportunities to encounter all sorts of people, serve those in need, while also spreading the Gospel throughout the Empire to whoever might listen.

Part of the genius of Christianity is the way that it takes an expression like "the poor" and infuses it with the meaning highlighted by Daniélou in 1965. Likewise phrases such as "the church of the poor," Daniélou wrote, remind us that the Church consists of those multitudes of people from all backgrounds who have sought a shepherd who not only heals them from their sins but leads them into the truth. As the circumstances of his death illustrated, Daniélou himself didn't hesitate to seek out lost members of Christ's little flock in the most utterly peripheral of places.

For the Jesuit cardinal, proclaiming and defending the truth entrusted to Christ's poor church was in no way incompatible with that very same poor church reaching out to those in need. And that, in many ways, sums up the evangelical challenge now being presented to us by our Jesuit pope: to keep open the "field hospital," as Francis recently called it, where sinner's wounds are bound up, so that, as Francis said in the same interview, "we can talk about everything else." That "everything else" is, of course, the fullness of the truth revealed by the one who is Divine Mercy Himself.

A very old-style Jesuit—and therefore Catholic—way of proceeding, I'd suggest.