



In the Company of the Poor: Conversations with Dr. Paul Farmer and Fr. Gustavo Gutiérrez, edited by Michael Griffin and Jennie Weiss Block, Orbis Books, Maryknoll, NY, 2013.

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As a young man, Fr. Gustavo Gutiérrez, a Dominican priest, ministered to the poor people of his parish in the slums of Lima, Peru. As he accompanied them in their suffering, he sought the counsel of biblical teaching concerning the poor and, in response, wrote foundational theological reflections that shaped liberation theology. Now in his 80s, he teaches at Notre Dame University.

Dr. Paul Farmer, a physician and medical anthropologist, is the founding director of Partners in Health and, now, the Chair of the Department of Global Health and Social Medicine at Harvard University. As a young American doctor working in Haiti, he came face-to-face with the suffering and early, preventable death of the rural poor.

In the Company of the Poor is less of a conversation between these two extraordinarily passionate men than Dr. Farmer's reflections on the writings and experiences of Fr. Gutiérrez that, in turn, shaped his understanding and approaches to health care among the poor. Partners in Health grew as a response to the deep inequities in access to medical care among the rural poor of Haiti and the societal structures that actively or passively sustained this injustice. Both men have mourned the deaths of close friends and colleagues who have either been murdered or died as a result of injustice — death squads and diseases.

In Chapters 3-5, the passionate and pragmatic activist responds to the reflections of the equally passionate priest of his father's generation. In Chapters 2 and 4, selections from Fr.

Gutiérrez lay a biblical and theological foundation for a Christ-like response to the poor. Chapter 2 focuses on the key question of liberation theology, how best to demonstrate God's love to the poor and chapter 4 on the necessity of conversion, a decision to follow Christ that is not only personal but social in its impact. Followers of Jesus reflect their deep love of God in company with the poor and marginal.

Dr. Farmer responds in chapters 3 and 5. He first explains how Fr. Gutiérrez influenced him and shaped his own vocation and the mission of Partners in Health. Then, citing his own experience and evidence-based arguments of the fatal impact of personal and structural injustice, he persuasively argues for excellence in health for the poor.

Like Dr. Farmer, I, too, discovered that Fr. Gutiérrez gives words to my own experience as a follower of Christ in health ministry to the poor. His words drawn from Catholic social teaching are different than the words of my own evangelical Protestant tradition. I often found myself thinking, "I'm going to have to read that several times before I get it." Also, because of the heated political arguments that emerged from the conflicts in Latin America in the closing decades of the last century, readers of my age and faith tradition have to read patiently and graciously. As I progressed through the book, I discovered that the strong biblical foundations of Fr. Gutiérrez's insights resonated with my own experience in health and development ministry. As a writer, Fr.

Gutiérrez's humility and authenticity retain the bewilderment, sorrow, and longing for transformation of a young pastor confronted with the suffering of his impoverished congregants.

- I, too, believe in God's preferential option for the poor, not because God loves the poor more or they are more deserving of his grace, but because he hates the sin that affects them. One of my early discoveries in Bangladesh was that, "A poor man's field may produce abundant food, but injustice sweeps it away" (Proverbs 13:23). Dr. Farmer responds with extensive evidence that disease and early death also have a preferential option for the poor, something that is part of the everyday experience of those of us who minister to the poor.
- I, too, believe that conversion in response to Jesus' love for us is essential, that we would be lost without God's "gratuitous love" toward us, and that our process of conversion continues throughout our lives and finds expression not only in love and service but in opposition to sin that holds others in bondage.
- I, too, believe that sin shapes the principalities and powers of the world, that we all are called to challenge the oppression caused by this sin in response to the vocation God has given us.

- I, too, believe that followers of Christ must accompany the poor in the journey, that joining them in community is essential to their transformation.
- And, I believe that anyone called into health care and service will face core issues of life and death, justice and oppression, healing, and suffering and that those of us who are followers of Christ are called, first of all, to be centered in him.

Dr. Farmer is essentially an activist, a doer, who remains uncomfortable with the foundational truths of Christian experience, grace, conversion, suffering, and a living faith. At least in this book, Dr. Farmer sips selectively from the spring that has clearly given life to Fr. Gutiérrez for over 80 years. Dr. Farmer uncharacteristically gave no response to Fr. Gutiérrez's final chapter, "The Option for the Poor Arises from Faith in Christ." Fr. Gutiérrez's chapters reflect his response to the *poor* in light of biblical teaching: Dr. Farmer's chapters reflect his response to *poverty*, more specifically related to health, in the light of Fr. Gutiérrez's teachings. Together, however, the passionate, pragmatic activist and the passionate, reflective theologian challenge those of us involved in health to a biblical and holistic understanding and response to the suffering and early death of the poor.

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