



*As we prepare ourselves for the fall 2012 U.S. elections, the JPIC Office and JPIC Directorate have been asked to present short pieces to help introduce particularly Franciscan and Catholic approaches to the decision-making process. Given their brevity, these pieces are not intended to address the complexity of the issues, but rather to provide broad parameters for use in our discernment of “what is ours to do.”*

### **Bringing a Preferential Option for the Poor to the Elections**

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Even as the U.S. and larger world hopefully move out of a recession, we continue to see strong evidence of considerable poverty in the U.S. and wider world. Short- and long-term efforts to support persons who are poor as well as help them move out of poverty and into sustainable self-sufficiency are goals at the heart of the Franciscan movement. This commitment affects how we, as faithful citizens inspired by the Franciscan way of following Christ, approach governmental and even personal budgets.

For St. Francis of Assisi and those involved in the early Franciscan movement, one of the energizing and uniting aspects of their approach to following in the footsteps of Jesus was an embrace the excluded of society, especially those who were poor. In the “Early Rule,” documents used to establish the Franciscan Order, particular attention was given to defining the experience of those who were poor and excluded. A commonality among all these people was an inability to fully participate in society, due to lack of wealth, lack of physical and/or mental ability, and/or lack of opportunity. Francis and his early followers made particular efforts to find ways to enable these “excluded” to take their rightful place in the larger society.

This same sensibility and motivation is at the heart of current efforts of Franciscans and all other followers of Christ. We see it in the works of charity and service in our ministries. We see it in the missions of organizations like Catholic Charities and Catholic Relief Services. We see it in several government programs that provide opportunities to and a safety net for persons who are poor. Such governmental activities can be seen as measures that support the common good in our complex world. Many of the issues of poverty and exclusion are too big and too complex to be addressed solely through charity and service. This is why the Church – and Franciscans as a part of it – strongly supports government programs that assist persons who are poor in the U.S. and wider world.

So how should we bring this worldview to our current situation, particularly the 2012 elections? In our tradition, we promote what we term a “preferential option for the poor.” What this means is that when we make budgetary or other policy decisions, we make them with an eye toward their impact on persons who are poor; we work to determine if decisions and policies help people move from exclusion to inclusion. As Franciscans, we want to see the “inclusion” manifested in two ways: the presence of a solid safety net to help persons maintain a dignified life; and programs and policies to help persons work in support of themselves and their families.

At present, with concerns about the size and growth of government budgets at the forefront, we need to bring this focus on a preferential option for the poor to the discussions as well. As we work to get the government’s budget in check, we must ensure that decisions that are made are not harmful to persons who are poor, even if the result is a greater burden of responsibility on the middle or wealthier income brackets. Unfortunately in the current political climate, almost no one is asking how proposed changes will affect persons who are poor; this is a bi-partisan omission.

As people of faith, daring to follow Jesus in the manner of Francis, we need to make sure that persons who are poor are not ignored in political discussions. We need to ask our candidates to consider whether proposed policies help or hurt persons who are poor, and we need to examine them for ourselves. These questions don’t have simple answers, but at the least we need to ensure that the questions are being asked and answered as honestly as possible.

For more on what principles might guide the creation of a federal budget that seeks to be faithful to a preferential option for the poor, please consult the The Faithful Budget Campaign, [www.faithfulbudget.org](http://www.faithfulbudget.org), of which the Holy Name Province is a proud participant.