

Preferring the option not to have a preferential option

By [Steve Thorngate](#)

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Last week, Faith in Public

Life asked Rick Santorum if he agrees with the Catholic teaching that public policy should include a "preferential option for the poor." He appeared to be unfamiliar with the concept:

To be fair, it's an awkward phrase--I wasn't sure what it meant the first time I heard it, either. Of course, I was a 20-year-old evangelical student at a college that [declines to employ Catholic scholars](#), not an uber-Catholic ([Amy Sullivan's apt term](#)) presidential candidate and former fellow at a faith-based policy think tank.

Mark Silk [points out](#) that the kinds of Catholic thinkers Santorum has worked with aren't big fans of the preferential option teaching. That's certainly true; it's unlikely that the [Ethics and Public Policy Center](#) will ever name a center for [Gustavo Gutiérrez](#). But it's one thing to downplay a teaching that you don't like, as the EPPC's George Weigel has done, and quite another to be altogether unaware of it like Santorum.

However you interpret its origins and significance, the notion of a preferential option for the poor is a central element of Catholic teaching. It's quite telling that a veteran politician who has routinely worn the "Catholic compassionate conservative" mantle doesn't know this.