

## **Overcoming Poverty as a Collective Obligation: Christian Perspective.**

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### **Introduction.**

Resentment to poverty and the desire to be on the side of wealth no matter how problematic that may be to the interpretation of Christ's teachings is lived an issue today as it has been since the beginning of Christianity. Poverty had been a problem one may say even before Christianity. Hence for much of their recorded history, the Israelites were obsessed with the idea of taking possession of the Promised Land and enjoying its over-flowing milk and honey (Exod. 20; 17, Deut. 3:7; 20:5,21). Despite his sympathy and softness for poor, his gospel being preached to them and himself preferring to be identified with them, Jesus ever set himself fighting poverty.

The first Christians did not seem to have been entrapped into the confusion about wealth and poverty as we have today. Right from the on set they advocated the principle of community of possession whereby members sold all they had and paid the proceed into a common treasury administered jointly by the apostles, from which they distributed to each according to his need (Jn. 12: 6; 13: 29; Act. 2: 44- 45). Theirs was a concrete step to overcoming poverty, a principle adopted to ensure that no one was too rich while some were too poor, and a declaration that poverty was unacceptable.

In his analysis of African mentality Ndiokwere (1994) state:

Where life has been granted, then follows the qualities of life, namely long life, prosperous life, happy life, goof life and so on. (p.65)

Nigerian Christians with their African mentality believe that wealth is desirable by all and sundry. There is therefore, no doubt that they cannot but get worried about the increasing rate of poverty in the land and seek ways of overcoming it.

The concept of poverty is elusive since it appears to defiles objective definition. However for the purpose of this article we shall take "the poor" to be the less-privileged in terms of material resources, the deprived, the marginalized, and the under-developed.

Here we must recall the view of Torres and Eagleson (1982) that when we talk about the poor, we are talking about something collective. The isolated poor person does not exist. That is precisely why the eruption of the poor is so tough and aggressive. If it were simply a matter of individual poor people, there would be no problem.

But since it has to do with classes, races, cultures etc. tension and conflicts are entailed. Torres and Egelson further insist that to talk about the poor is also to point out the element of social conflicts, as the word “poor” is not a tranquilizing one. The poor person is the product or by-product of an economic and social system fashioned by a few for their own benefit. So a structural conflict is embedded in the reality of the poor.

The focus of the article is on overcoming poverty with the poor as a collective concept. Overcoming poverty for an individual poor *per se* is beyond the scope of the article. We intend to examine the topics under the headings: relationship between private property/life style and poverty, the role the Church and the common way out of poverty.

### **Relationship between Private Property/Life Style and Poverty**

One big social factor militating against overcoming poverty is the delicate issue of private property or ownership. Beginning with John Chrysostom in the late 4<sup>th</sup> Century up to third world peasant of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, questions have been asked and meanings searched for as regards to private ownership as a factual and legal phenomenon. Avila (1983) thinks that these questions and search for meanings are not about ownership in practice or “ownership as it is”. He goes on to say;

They know that only too painfully well. Rather they are searching for the meaning of the concept ownership “as it ought to be”. They want to discover the living soul, the essence and purpose, the “within” the innermost meaning of ownership (p. 2).

Their viewpoint is not merely factual; it is ethical. They are searching for moral philosophical theory, one either logically realized or grossly betrayed by current practices and institutions. Indeed their question seeks to investigate the deeper reasons behind even this foundational idea, as they search for a model of how this powerful right enjoyed by some individuals really ought to be regarded. They are asking whether there is an ethics, a moral philosophy of ownership.

We may not take line of St. Augustine of Hippo that the accumulation of property or capital necessarily involved forced (violence, enslavement, robbery, murder); or agree with St. Ambrose that it meant that a few would try to own the whole themselves; or see with John Chrysostom, of nature becoming indignant at being turned

into private property. The point is that the welfare of human beings largely depends on the justice of human having.

If we agree with Clarence Eluvel (1958) that justice is virtue, then we will begin to ask if the justice of private ownership right that creates gross unequal distribution of the earth's resources is a virtuous one. The question here is how may one use the justice of private ownership right without creating unequal distribution of earth's resources? The right to property should not be understood in thoroughly individualistic terms as the right of individual to dispose of the goods in his possession with full freedom, according to his own pleasure without social limits, obligations or duties.

We may agree that no one may rightly indict a person who out of personal industry and enterprise acquire and enjoy personal property on earth. But we may not rule out that in some cases the ability of some to acquire much of the earthly goods may lead to the inability of others, at least some to acquire them.

Both the poor and the rich must differentiate between "coping with poverty" and "overcoming poverty". Coping with poverty involves personal struggle and determination on the part of the poor, then support and solidarity on the part of the rich. Again in "coping" poverty is seen as a cross to be piously carried by individuals but in overcoming it is seen as an evil to be courageously fought by all. When Edward Nkwuegu (2008) states that "New Testament poverty is a cherished religious value of simplicity of life, it does not imply that poverty should be slavishly followed" (p.31).

As Onuigbo (2001) would believe, history is important to our theme because, as elsewhere, it provides unique perspectives. It is easy and sensible to look at the history of rich people we know who had very poor background, but who reshaped their destiny by conscientious efforts and sacrifices. From history too we learn how some people were made to be poor as result of greedy acquisition system of the society.

We must realize that much as there is need to stress the spiritual dimension of poverty which is important for coping with it, doing so without over-spiritualizing the concept is very important. On the other hand, Euzler (1969) would insist that poverty of the spirit that Christianity teaches should regulate the private property ownership and individual life style. Chadwick (1981) was full of criticism to the extravagances of a Renaissance Pope Leo X, reputed to have said "let us enjoy the papacy, since God has given it to us", or

over an ancient regime prelate like the Archbishop of Mainz, who arrived for the coronation of the Emperor Joseph II with a retinue of 14 sumptuous carriage on the ground that a Christian should be in the world but not of it.

Dorr (1984) following the line of liberation theology talks of the poor being made to recognize their own talent, the gift of others and to take responsibility for their lives and the world. Selfishness and greed in the acquisition of wealth rampant in our present day society often constitute a great hindrance to the poor liberating themselves from the bondage of poverty.

It is never an over statement to say that overcoming poverty should be the first of the priorities of any serious government. Perhaps the first expectation is that it be concerned about the high level of poverty in the country. Then beginning with himself and his functionaries look into the systems of private ownership/life style that tend to promote poverty. Hence, Odeh (2003) thinks that government whose associates, collaborators and chieftains squander millions of niara daily in a life of vanity and debauchery, palatial mansion that are often too large for comfort here and there, possessed expensive cars that they do not really need, make regular trip to overseas in all obscene and extravagance, cannot be said to have any concern for the poor and poverty in general. Certainly in one way or the other the acquisition of such wealth and affluence is as a result unjust systems and structures, which it allows to flourish.

Bindir (2004) identifies nine factors that contribute to alarming level of poverty in many countries. This includes: Macroeconomic distortions, effects of globalization, governance, corruption, debt burden, low productivity, unemployment, high population growth rate and poor human resources development. Government should seriously look into these factors with the view of addressing the effect each has on poverty.

St. Clement of Alexandria devoted Book Two of his *Paedagoges* to a consideration of the luxury of some in social circumstances where other persons are poor. In these circumstances, St. Clement consider luxury as an injustice. He adduces “facial and down right ridiculous” example of rich peoples bringing out urinal of silver and chamber pots of transparent alabaster (Avila 1983). St. Clement contrasts “use” and “holding” and holds that property is for use not for holding. The rich must not allow themselves to be blinded

by their passion for luxury at the expense and detriment of “so many who labour in poverty”.

Mbachi (1991) in what he calls “power at grips with poverty” describes the sad picture of the West Africa scene, the result of the scramble for power which is an institutionalized inequality. It is a “tale of African two adjacent cities” in form of dichotomy between the affluent power elite and the poor masses. On the left one sees oasis of riches and power, on the right ghettos and utter helplessness. Christian faith does not advocate equality of all citizens nor does it intend to hold that God created all to be equal in terms of wealth. But the fact remains that in a system of such gross inequalities the poor masses are always exploited. Cases abound where even government poverty alleviation programmes and welfare schemes for the poor have been hijacked by the few rich and powerful. In extreme cases the progress of the poor are blocked for no other reason than to maintain the dichotomy and the status quo. Lifely Christian conscience that guilds human behaviour to one another is very important in poverty alleviation. The high degree of economic and structural inequality in many parts of our country despite the daily growth of Christianity is very lamentable. Our economy has continued to be marked by a very uneven distribution of wealth and income. Many higher degree holders are unemployed in our common nation where highly remunerated and prestigious jobs in government ministries and parastatals are given to retired senior army officers, university professors and top senior civil servants. Politicians swap one high political post with another, one tenure to another even when many unemployed higher degree holders in various disciplines are in the same political parties and are highly qualified for the posts.

The principle of social solidarity in line with Christian ethics suggests that economic structures that perpetuates glaring inequalities and cut off millions of citizens from full participation in the economic and social life of the nation should be dismantled (Hoye 1986).

Pope John XX III (1961) is of the opinion that because all people are so intimately associated in all parts of the world, the nations that enjoy a sufficiency and abundance of every thing may not over look the plight of other nations whose citizens experience great poverty. In the same vein of correct justice of private ownership Odah (1995) seems to have identified an area of concentration in the

global fight against poverty when he observes that the ever-widening gap between rich and poor nations has created today a highly explosive situation in which millions are denied basic rights.

In his Encyclical *Laborem Exercens* (Dignity of Labour) John Paul II specifically addresses implicitly the problem of poverty. It is definitely on continuing concern for poverty that the pontifical council for justice held conference in Rome on 12<sup>th</sup> to 15<sup>th</sup> September 2001 with the team "Work as key to the Social Question" aimed at emphasizing the need to ensuring that world resources are utilized for the benefit of all.

In this perspective, Dunn (1980) goes on to argue that development was synonymous with economic growth. It could be measured by comparing the gross national product or the per capital income of developing nations with countries regarded as highly developed. Dunn sees a flaw here as it involves frustrating and making unreal the raised expectations of the poor. This is because the issue of private ownership right, the root causes of underdevelopment and stagnation were not analyzed.

Dunn obviously has private property in mind when he talks of development that "falls pitifully short of its goals", because with such development, instead of closing the gap between rich and poor nations, the gap between them is widened. Pope Paul VI in his Encyclical *Populaorum Progressio* (Development of Peoples) condemns the continued greed of the rich on the excuse of private property right that often forces the masses to the extremity of poverty.

### **The Role the Church.**

The church has always regarded a concern for the poor as its basic duty on earth. The church fathers repeatedly stressed that the goods of the earth were created by God for the benefit of every person. Without exception all had a special duty towards those in need. The monasteries of the middle ages not only were centers of prayer, but also of learning and education. They contributed greatly to the cultural and economic life of towns and cities that sprang up around them. The rediscovering of the Church of the poor is one of the hallmarks of liberation theology which is gaining ground in many countries in recent times (McVeigh 1989).

What consists of such a concern is an important question today. Does it consist admonishing the poor like Euzler (1969) puts it "to accept your present poverty with a simple and pure resignation"? (p.86). Does it consist in agreeing with Dalrymple (1979) in teaching

that all takes “a decision for the gospel’s sake. A decision for poverty” (p.104). Or does it consist in taking the line of Mbachii (1991) which is “consistly taking a stand by the poor in order to liberate them”? (p.79). If we agree with Bloesch (1981) that religion is not a private matter but embraces the whole of life; we will also see with him that it is important to become involved in the social questions and conflicts around us “even at the risk of succumbing to the ideological temptation, for only in this way is our faith made relevant and credible to people today” (p.206). Mbachii enjoins that in this “New Era of Evangelization”; the church’s hierarchy should no longer wait for God to come and intervene on the side of the poor. What Mbachii means in effect is that there is no point in admonishing the poor to stand still here on earth in hunger, misery and deprivation and wait for heaven as if they are excluded from the earthly beauties of God’s creation. Much as we should not make the mistake as Hitchcock (1981) would say, “of thinking that worldly progress defiles the message of the gospel” (p.106) we must see with Ehusani (1996) that only incarnate doctrines, incarnate dogmas i.e. embodiments of faith that light up and speaks to the specific socio-political and economic circumstances in which they live would make meaning to hungry and distressed people. Besides, we would think that for the church to be complacent in the midst of gross corruption, economic crime and sabotage that impoverish the vast majority of the masses amounts to what Quoits (1965) calls being content with individual “conversions” in the efforts to liberate man rather than struggle to convert the institution which constitutes the society.

Osunwokeh (1986) talks of the church learning to set its priorities in favour of people rather than structures. Frankly speaking the issue of structures in the church is rather a very delicate one that needs a deeper reflection and a serious magisterium decision. Indeed this is an area where human element in our church often comes to the fore. While we agree that structural development most often attracts the interest of any appraisal body for a church minister, we must also take note of the fact that the urge to put up all structures “in my time” is simply worldly.

The church must not allow the world of politics and economics to be abandoned to the principalities and powers that perpetuate abject poverty among our people.

We often hear of rich parishes, rich dioceses and the priests and bishops in them strife to retain the name and keep the status quo

by erecting and maintaining expensive, flashy and gigantic churches, halls, and rectories, decorated with marbles and costly furnitures, and having high-class electronic and media gadgets and expensive cars. No one questions the spirit of hard work and commitment of the pastors that carry out the execution of these projects; neither should any one devalue the great faith of the people that contribute the money; no one also denies that “a thing of beauty is a joy forever”, but when it comes to issue of overcoming poverty and the church’s stand, questions become obvious.

Early Christian missionaries here in Nigeria built school, hospitals, orphanages and small-scale income generation projects, all aimed at alleviating poverty of the areas they came to evangelize. These institutions were managed and sustained in such a way that they served their purpose which of course was not to enhance the economic position of the missionaries themselves. Today what reason can one give for the church running special schools and special hospitals that are out of the reach of the poor masses other than economic? By devoting its resources to building and maintaining such institutions meant only for the rich in the society is the Church not widening the already wide-gap existing between the rich and the poor that is one of the sad causes of increasing poverty in Nigerian society? John Odey (2003) laments the deplorable condition of public educational institutions in Nigeria from primary up to university level and the President and this team having no positive agenda to remedy the sad situation but rather “setting up private universities for their own children”. The church should embark on concrete developmental programmes to fight poverty. Justice and Peace Development of Enugu Catholic Diocese under Monsignor Obiora Ike has done so much in this direction. All its projects are seen to be real common-people oriented and they directly address the issue of poverty alleviation. Experience has shown that poverty alleviation efforts no matter how little when really directed to the poor are helpful.

The church as an institution must endeavour to pursue what Dalrymple calls “a restoration of social conscience” among the Christians. Our generation abounds with examples of Christian industrialists, labour employers, businessmen and traders who lead devout family lives and often endow their local church while saddening of the poor by their wicked and unfair treatment.

Dumas (1978) must be thinking of correct interpretation of the biblical texts on wealth and poverty when he says that a task before

me as a Christian living in the world should be how can I reconcile a quest for God and secular planning in a way which adds up to more than a vague combination of “spiritual” aspiration with ideological affirmation, economic pressures and even tactical opportunity?.

The Catholic Church must illustrate in clear terms in her teaching that detachment, a recommendable way of Christian spirituality does not mean “that we love nothing but God” (McNamara 1967:28) but that it means rather than we love everything in God. Accordingly the church must encourage the people to be part of the political and economic development of the day. We agree fully with (Odey; 2001, Escriva 1977)

### **The Common Way Out Of Poverty**

Responsible commitment to work, so to speak, in all shapes and sizes counts very much in overcoming poverty For John Paul II there is an urgent need to instill into the younger generation of our land sincerely keen interest, a convincing orientation toward work .In the modern world of twenty-first century where things are so simplified and people made to be prone to leisure and laziness, we would rather agree with John Paul II that there is need for discovering of the new meaning of human work. Work must be seen as a divine imperative, an order given to man even right from the Garden of Eden. This truth about work is also emphasized by stress (2002).

Dorr (1984) maintains that option to promote social justice is extremely difficult. But we know that to make an option is to make a personal choice, which is a serious demand of our Christian calling. The choice is working for the society in which the poor are given preference since their needs are greater. This is part of the universal call of the Christian faith which is addressed to all people. For those at the top in the society the first stage in opting for the poor is the recognition that the structures of the society give them an unfair advantage over others. They should therefore exercise restraint in their claims and rights in the society. For those that occupy the middle place in the society who are actually the ones that operate the unjust structures, the proposal is that their opting for the poor should consist mainly in encouraging and motivating the poor to join in devising and implementing alternative structures.

In his speech to the General Assembly of the United Nations in New York 2<sup>nd</sup> October 1979, John Paul II, points out that it is no secret that the abyss separating the minority of the excessively rich

from the multitude of the destitute poor is very grave symptom in the life of many nations. And he thinks that the only way to overcome this serious disparity between areas of satiety and areas of hunger and depression is through coordinated cooperation by all countries. If cooperation in a globalized world is important in poverty alleviation, cooperation in a localized way imbedded in the Christian teaching of love is much more important. This involves, the support, the assistance, the solidarity, the encouragement that people offer to their neighbours in the society that enable the weak and the less privileged to be sustained and to rise up.

### **Conclusion**

Poverty in its relative or absolute terms has remained a serious problem in our Nigerian society. Poverty due to laziness, disorder and extravagant living was condemned by the ancient wisdom teachers, (Nkwegu, 2008, cf. Prov. 28:19). It must be seen as encouraging that Christianity since its inception has tried varied efforts to address it with a view to reducing it, alleviating it and/or eradicating it. We cannot say all have been fruitless but as facts on ground have shown, only very little have been achieved. We must, therefore, continue to explore and employ means and ways of coming out of this evil that are economic and social, political and moral. Christian churches must intensify their teachings to awaken people to unswerving instinct for kindness, charity and love.

Where programs have failed we should discard them, learn from our mistakes and fashion alternative; where they have succeeded we should acknowledge that fact and build on these successes in every instance, we must summon a new creativity and commitment to the practice of our Christian religious texts to eradicate poverty in our midst and to guarantee all Nigerians their right to share in the blessing of our land. In view of the fact that Nigeria is ranked among the leading oil producing nations of the world, poverty in our land is poverty amidst plenty, which is pitiable and lamentable. Corruption which has been identified by Eya (2009) quoting Hilary Clinton as one of the major causes of poverty in Nigeria must be seriously fought by all.

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