

# PREFERENTIAL OPTION FOR THE POOR: A CHALLENGE FOR THE CHURCH IN AFRICA

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## INTRODUCTION

Decrying the atrocious and horrible situation of the African continent today, especially from the perspective of the Church's mission of evangelization, the Synod Fathers said: "In a continent full of bad news, how is Christian message 'Good News' for our people?. In the midst of an all-pervading despair, where lie the hope and optimism which the Gospel bring?"<sup>1</sup> The mission of Jesus Christ is good news *per se*. Such he read out from the scroll to the entire humanity symbolically present in the Jewish community. An aspect of that mission of Jesus commissioned by the Holy Spirit says: "He has anointed me to preach the gospel to the poor" (cf. Is. 61, Lk. 4). Thus this preferential option forms the overall gamut of Christ's salvific ministry of which the Church is both a Custodian and Dispenser. It is on that footing however we have resolved to consider whether the Church in Africa worth's the name vis-à-vis the prospects, problems and challenges that go along with poverty and poor individuals in the society.

## THE SITUATIONS OF THE POOR

Millions of those who fill our churches every Sunday are daily putting up with sub-human conditions. The Good News of Jesus Christ is to be preached in Nigeria to a people who have lost almost completely their national pride. The message of liberation is to be preached to a people on the fringe of human existence.<sup>2</sup>

Who are these people on the "fringe of human existence" if not the poor ones in our midst? Their situations are deplorable, dehumanizing, alarming and pathetic. These are the 'anawims' of the society. Some of them sleep on the side of the road in our towns, live under the overhead bridges in our cities and compete with vultures in scavenging for food.<sup>3</sup> These are living images of God. They include equally those

detained without trial for prolonged periods of time, the unemployed graduate who is on the verge of despair, and the battered house-wife, the exploited labourer, and the defenceless victim of police brutality and military repression.<sup>4</sup> These are the poor. They are in desperate need of help. They need deliverance from the clutches of poverty and social neglect. The Fathers of the Second Vatican Council remarked extensively on this thus:

Wherever men are to be found who are in want of food and drink, of clothing, housing, medicine, work, education, the means necessary for leading a truly human life, wherever there are men racked by misfortune or illness, men suffering exile or imprisonment, Christian charity should go in search of them and find them out, comfort them with devoted care and give them the helps that will relieve their needs.<sup>5</sup>

The fact that Jesus quotes Isaiah in our introductory discourse shows conclusively how close the poor and needy were to his heart and mission. He aimed at fulfilling the promises of God started by the prophets. Jesus concern for the poor extends to his concern for the fact of social justice. He of course, lived in a corrupt society colonized by the Romans.<sup>6</sup> In that regard still, the Oxford English Encyclopedic Dictionary defines a poor person as lacking adequate money or means to live comfortably, and as someone deficient in a possession or quality. Suffice it to say that a poor person is the one who is completely dependent on another for his or her livelihood. Concerning the poor St. John Chrysostom says: "Not to enable the poor share in our goods is to steal from them and deprive them of life. The goods we possess are not ours but theirs."

## THE POOR IN THE PASTORAL MISSION OF THE CHURCH

According to Raphael Osegboun the Church sees the pastoral care of the poor as the works of mercy, charitable actions by which we come to the aid of our neighbour his/her spiritual and bodily necessities.<sup>7</sup> Thus he strongly asserts:

Instructing, advising, consoling. Comforting are spiritual works of mercy, consist especially in feeding the hungry, sheltering the homeless, clothing the naked, visiting the sick and imprisoned and burying the dead....<sup>8</sup>

Corollary, "every work of mercy is aimed at alleviating the problem of

the poor and to gain graces of divine mercy for the individual carrying out such work. Stressing further on this fact, the Church asserts that: The particular virtue of mercy is rooted in, and evoked by, the mercy of God, and all Christian mercy is rooted in the example of Christ himself.... We see the distress of others as our own distress.<sup>11</sup>

In one of his Papal Encyclicals the Holy Father observes that by virtue of her own evangelical duty the church feels called to take her stand beside the poor, to discern the justice of their requests, and to help satisfy them.<sup>111</sup> Such a document came up certainly in a severe atmosphere of economic poverty and political turbulence. It could also be noted that the challenge of massive poverty that was rocking the very edifice of the working class made Pope Leo XIII to write the encyclical *Rerum Novarum*.

*Simili modo*, the Latin-American episcopate and theologians proposed a "preferential option for the poor" as an expression of the Church's witness in the area of social justice. Pope John Paul II in his *Centesimus Annus* remarks:

... today more than ever, the Church is aware that her message will gain credibility more immediately from the witness of actions than as a result of its internal logic. This awareness is a source of the church's preferential option for the poor.<sup>12</sup>

From this papal document, it becomes deducible that the Holy Father is advocating for more practical and direct witnessing to the poor than for mere *flatus vocis* of theoretical dogmas and utopian principles. His document reveals that pastoral mission to the poor had been the Church's option *ab initio*, but with passage of time appears to be losing its force and vigour. The Pope is calling for a return to the past, in the spirit of the early Church. The Church on her own part is not oblivious of this fact. She is well aware of her vocation to witness both in words and deeds. Consequently, it is very remarkable that one of the outstanding organizations that has option for the poor as its guiding principle, the Society of St. Vincent de Paul was founded as a result of a challenge during an anti-clerical debate when professors and students told Frederick-Antoine Ozanam who was defending the Church: "show us your works and we will believe

you". The result was that it dawned on Ozanam that "it is not enough to believe or to even defend the faith, not enough to adore the God of the Gospel, one must follow Christ in the service of the poor."<sup>13</sup> Our people normally say, "onye aguu na-agu adighi ekwe" 'Alleluia;' meaning that 'a hungry person does not comfortably pray or sing Alleluia'. Prior to the miracle of feeding the five thousands in the desert, Jesus said something to his disciples, an expression quite indicative of the Church's responsibility in the midst of her suffering and hungry children "You, give them something to eat" (cf. Matt. 14:1-16). By that very miraculous feat, Jesus demonstrates in unmistakable manner that preaching of the word should be firmly sealed with practical act of charity. He demonstrates that the human person should be considered from the integral and holistic perspective-body and soul.

### THE FOOT-PRINTS OF THE CHURCH

In her mission, both as a Teacher and a Shepherd the Church has recorded a lot of Saints and Blessed whose lives and deeds bore eloquent testimonies and impressions of her godly disposition towards the poor. Let us consider inter-alia, these two examples of evangelical charity to the poor-Saint Vincent de Paul and Blessed Frederick Ozanam. Saint Vincent was from a poor family and his parents had to struggle a lot for his studies and the up-keep of the family. From the very beginning he knew what hardship in life means, he knew what poverty is all about. He gradually, learnt to be charitable to houses in need. For him, Saint Vincent's main mission was to bring salvation of body and soul to the people he served as a Christian and a priest. He did this among poor villagers as well as among the rich. He founded small groups of men and women, which were taking care of the poor, and the sick and through these groups, he realized that unity is strength. Actually Frederick Ozanam had visualized this hence he proposed that the work of his Conference of Charity be placed under the patronage of Saint Vincent de Paul.<sup>14</sup> Numerous dependable sources disclose that St. Vincent and Blessed Frederick were not contented with the situation of the poor. They never even intended the poor to remain in poverty or in need. They were not satisfied

simply to serve the poor. They rather wanted the poor to get rid of their poverty. They wanted to see them improve their lives in the spirit of justice. They empowered the poor so that they could stand by themselves.

It is quite fulfilling and satisfying to see that some of the centres we have like Ozanam House in Lagos and Ile-Alaafia in Ibadan try to up-lift the poor by finding out their talents or charisms in order to explore them more for their own benefit and the benefit of the centers. This is true charitable empowerment of the poor.<sup>15</sup> Drawing from these, the Church in Africa within the possible range of her capacity is trying her best to make the impact of the gospel values felt especially among the poor of the society. However, the government should support and encourage charitable causes making life bearable for the citizens. Suffice it to also mention that the Church is waxing stronger in following the footsteps of her Lord and Master Jesus Christ. This Christ, according to Father Ndiokwere, an eminent Nigerian theologian,

Preached love and justice and made himself the relentless champion of the poor, the children and the oppressed, and all the marginalised people in the society of his day.<sup>16</sup>

Ndiokwere strongly observed that Christ identified Himself with men and women, and every time that man and woman becomes the victim of justice and oppression, it is Christ himself who is wounded.<sup>17</sup> Dehumanizing effect of poverty looms largely when Okeke says, Poverty contributes to making people live an unbearable life that continually chips away on their dignity.<sup>18</sup> Harping on the same issue the Holy father remarks,

The poverty of an over-increasing number of our brothers and sisters destroys their human dignity and disfigures humanity as a whole. It is scandal which cries out for the response of solidarity and justice.<sup>19</sup> The Church in her mission therefore, is fighting tooth and nail to restore this human dignity that is being tampered with by economic, social and intellectual poverty, and other problem-related issues in the world.

Besides, the Church has to her credit numerous social institutions and Cheshire homes together with pious societies and solidarities that undertake as their

apostolate the care and service of the poor. It is quite interesting to remark that in Seminaries this idea of concern and option for the poor is very much extolled and encouraged. For instance, in the Seminaries there are solidarity groups like Madonna Mercy Family, Legion of Mary, St. Anthony's Guild, St. Jude's society, Bigard Charity Committee, etc. They all have as their objective to get at the poor ones of the society and minister to them through active love and service. In many of the Nigerian Major Seminaries Seminarians often utilize their periods of weekly apostolic work to visit those in prisons, Cheshire Homes, Old Peoples Homes, and Motherless Babies Homes. They often come back with pathetic and heart-breaking stories of human image such adventures do present. They also visit hospitals and minister to beggars in the streets. This is aimed at keeping the Seminarians abreast with the realities of human conditions they are going to encounter in future as Priests. The same practice is obtainable in other Seminaries and Catholic institutions in Africa. To corroborate the fact in question Peschke a moral theologian says,

Concern for the poor and needy has been an outstanding characteristic of the Church throughout the centuries. History gives evidence of the

Church's solicitous care for the needy at all times.<sup>20</sup>

Obviously numerous religious order and pious communities of men and women dedicated themselves to this task.<sup>21</sup> The Church in Africa, has stood her ground amidst counter-currents and turbulent waves of political miasma. She has kept the light of faith burning. This is the light which darkness of African corruption cannot put off, for she is firmly established on Christ, the Rock of Ages. If there is anywhere the poor and needy can find lasting hope and solace, it is in the Church. In affirming this Peschke continues,

For many centuries the organized care for the poor and the orphans, for the crippled and the sick, and for other groups in need was almost exclusively in the hands of the Church.<sup>22</sup>

A good number of Religious Congregations in the Church today have 'care for the poor and disabled' as their apostolic spirituality and charism. Blessed Mother Teresa of Calcutta remains an outstanding guru in this regard.

## PROBLEMS AND CHALLENGES

It is not as if to say that the whole drama of witnessing has been a smooth sail

for the Church in Africa. The forces of darkness are there. The incessant wave of anti clerical propaganda is also there. Many priests have been killed and parish rectories looted and burnt in a bid to get at the money collected for the up-keep and maintenance of the poor in various communities. Sometimes priests are attacked and driven out of their parishes whenever they perform their prophetic role of denouncing injustice and corruption in their areas of ministry. These people of underworld in our various communities certainly do not want to hear the voice of the prophets. This is because they feel convicted and judged, thereby revealing their vicious acts.<sup>23</sup> As a result, a good number of priests has been assassinated. Will the Church draw back because of these problems and challenges? No, for this I am certain that no matter what happens, the gates of hell shall not prevail (cf. Matt.16 1-18). This ministry of the Church should always reflect her qualities as a prophet as Ehusani illustrates.

Prophets speak for God under different circumstances.... They warn evil doers of the inevitability of nemesis, while giving the much needed hope to a suffering people.<sup>24</sup>

He said that the prophets tell the poor and oppressed or the victims of injustice not to despair, because God is capable of intervening and turning things around.<sup>25</sup> Prophets give reason for the poor to hope,<sup>2525</sup> Ehusani continued, and that is what the church in Africa is doing. And so, the Church-her courageous ministers and the lay faithful at the battle field should not to relent for the gates of underworld shall never prevail.

## CONCLUSION

Preferential option for the poor, is something quite natural and inherent already in the essence of the Church as a corporate reality. The burning desire to cater for the poor is a virtue that resides with her *ab initio* since the day the Holy Spirit descended on the apostles. It began with the birth of the Church. Preferential option for the poor is a godly disposition, which the Holy Spirit wishes to perpetuate in the Church via the various Popes that have paddled the Church's canoe up to this present moment. Let the

Church therefore uphold this wholesome mandate from above. Let our priests, the prophets of the time renew their evangelical commitment and fearlessly stand for Christ in their crusade to improve the life of the poor children of God.

### Endnotes

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25. Ibid.