

THE CHURCH'S ROLE IN PROMOTING JUSTICE IN NIGERIA

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Introduction: The Notion of Justice

One would like to begin this article by, first of all, spelling out the notion of justice that underlies the expectation of a just society in Nigeria. Since it is a question of the church's role in promoting such a society, there is no better place to begin to look for the meaning of justice than from the Bible.

The word and concept of justice find abundant reference in the Bible. Its meaning is varied. Comprehensively understood, it is "full religious and moral rectitude".¹ It is thus synonymous, even interchangeable with "righteousness". As a distinct virtue its meaning is understood variously as:

- (a) conformity with a legal norm (Prov. 11:4—19; 12:28; 16:8; Deut 1:16; 16:18; 25:15);
- (b) due rights (Hos. 10:12; Is. 9:6; 11:4f; 16:5; 32:1; Jer. 22:3f; 23:5; Ez. 45:9f; 2 Sam 8:15; 1 Kg. 10:9; 1 Chr. 1:14; 2 Chr. 9:8);
- (c) payment of "living wages" (Jer. 22:13—15);
- (d) rectitude in the mutual relationships of men (Job 35:8; Eccles. 5:7);
- (e) benevolence (Job 7:6; 9:6; 12:9; 14:9—11; Sir. 3:30; 2 Cor. 9:9f).²

In the view of St. Thomas Aquinas, justice is "the strong and firm will to give to each his due".³ In elaborating Aquinas' definition of justice, Jose-Maria Diez — Alegria has written:

*In the comprehensive sense justice, in a given situation, is the concrete accomplishment of the fundamental imperative which calls for positive respect for the dignity and rights of others and contribution to the meeting of human necessities.*⁴

Another contemporary writer has preferred to draw distinctions between what he calls the meanings of justice in the widest sense, justice in the narrowest sense, and justice in the proper sense. In the first sense, justice is integrity or moral excellence, which corresponds to its commonest meaning in the Old Testament. In the second (the narrowest) sense, justice is merely conformity with the law — an obviously inadequate meaning, since there is such a thing as an "unjust law". In its third (the proper) sense, justice is "the harmonious functioning of the constituent parts (in the individual or in the State)".⁵

One form of justice that needs be mentioned explicitly is what another author has called "general or social justice". It is

... the general good in all its aspects and implications, with no other limits than the due proportion between one's own needs and those of others (cf. 2 Cor. 8:13—15). ... For this general or social justice has as its immediate object a common good transcendentally ordained to each man (Thomas Aquinas, Summa Theological Ia IIae, q. 58, a5).

*... social justice can take the form of obligations of justice towards certain persons in need of aid.*⁶

Justice and Love

As is well known, according to the New Testament, love is the greatest commandment of all (Mk. 12:28—34; Mt. 22:34—40; Lk. 10:25—28), and the greatest of the three things that last, namely, faith, hope and love (1 Cor 13:13). It is that also by which "all men will know that you are my disciples" (Jn 13:35). If all this is so, this article would like to explore the relationship that exists between justice and love, and see how the former fits into the "greatest commandment" of love.

In 1971, the Synod of Catholic Bishops, meeting in Rome on the theme of "Ministerial Priesthood and Justice in the World", made the following statement:

*Christian love of neighbour and justice cannot be separated. For love implies an absolute demand for justice, namely, a recognition of the dignity and rights of one's neighbour. Justice attains its inner fullness only in love. Because every man is truly a visible image of the invisible God and a brother of Christ, the Christian finds in every man God himself and God's absolute demand for justice and love.*⁷

Bernard Häring's contribution to the discussion is quite instructive. He begins with a bare statement, that "every duty in justice is a duty in love... (but) not every duty in love is strictly a duty in justice".⁸ That is to say, love is wider in extension and context than, but inclusive of, justice. Häring had earlier elaborated that

*If one treats justice one-sidedly in terms of material goods (acquisition, property, exchange), then only with difficulty can he arrive at a comprehensive view. The person has rights that stand on a much higher plane than property rights. To another, not his goods but his personal dignity and personal rights are due before all else. But without love — i.e. without that attitude that is directed to the person as such — the most sublime rights of the person and of the community cannot be fully and authentically recognized at all.*⁹

Haring then makes certain basic propositions on the relationship between justice and love, which this article would endorse; namely:

1. Love is more basic than justice.
2. Love best guarantees the fulfilment of justice.
3. The aim of justice must be achieved in the spirit of love.
4. Love gives clear vision and full extension to justice.
5. When there is question of one's own activity, one who bases himself on love considers primarily not the minimum requirements of justice but the actual needs of his neighbour and of the community...
6. Love is always prepared to suspend one's own rights for the good of another, assuming, of course, that the rights are such that they can be given up without damage to one's integrity and that of the community.¹⁰

One would wish that the crusaders for justice everywhere would always have in view the relationship between it and love, as has been here indicated.

Justice and Human Rights

From what has been said so far, it ought to be quite obvious that the human person is the primary subject of justice, not his or her possessions. The subject of justice is every human person precisely because he or she is a person, not because of whatever kind of person he or she happens to be. This is arguably, what gave rise to the following monumental statements, among others:

All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights". (The United Nations Organisation). "No one can be perfectly

free till all are free; no one can be perfectly moral till all are moral; no one can be perfectly happy 'till all are happy'" (Herbert Spencer). "I am the inferior of any man whose rights I trample underfoot". (Thomas Ingersoll).¹¹

The Symposium of Episcopal Conferences of Africa and Madagascar (SECAM), speaking on the same subject in the African context, has said:

For us, what is at stake... is man. — the African man — irrespective of the colour of his skin, his ethnic origin, his social condition, or his cultural or religious environment. What is at stake are his aspirations and hopes, his struggles and sufferings, his successes and failures...

Christ, according to our faith, came to save and liberate this man, "to liberate him from everything that oppresses him" (Evangelii Nuntiandi,⁹). This is the total liberation which concerns man in all the dimensions of his being and existence. This liberation, therefore, is not only of the spiritual and interior order; it has a direct impact on the concrete, individual, and collective lives of mankind.

Christ liberated every man and the whole man. In Him and through Him all men have become fundamentally equal; they are brothers. Hence, as regards the human person, the liberation of man means decolonisation, development, social justice, respect for the inalienable rights and fundamental liberties.¹²

Another fact that should by now be obvious is that justice has to do with human rights, namely those rights which accrue to every human person, precisely because he or she is a person and not a beast or an artifact. Justice demands that such rights be always and everywhere respected. For the enunciation of some of those rights, one may borrow from the following statement of the Second Vatican Council:

Therefore, there must be made available to all men everything necessary for leading a life truly human, such as food, clothing and shelter; the right to education; the right to employment, to a good reputation, to respect, to appropriate information, to activity in accordance with the upright norm of one's conscience, to protection of privacy and to rightful freedom in matters religious too.¹³

Earlier on Pope Pius XII had stressed that

*Justice requires that all men acknowledge and defend the sacrosanct rights of human freedom and human dignity, and that the infinite wealth and resources with which God has endowed the whole of the earth shall be distributed in conformity with right reason, for the use of all his children.*¹⁴

The view that God almighty intended the whole of creation for the enjoyment of all his children is as old as Genesis 1:28. Early in the Christian era, St. Ambrose commented on this view as follows:

*You are not making a gift of your possessions to the poor person. You are handing over to him what is his. For what has been given in common for the use of all, you have arrogated to yourself. The world is given to all, and not only to the rich.*¹⁵

In more recent times, Pope Paul VI added the statement that

*...private property does not constitute an absolute and unconditional right. No one is justified in keeping for his exclusive use what he does not need, when others lack necessities... the right to property must never be exercised to the detriment of the common good.*¹⁶

Prevailing Conditions

While it is gratifying to note that "there is a growing awareness of the exalted dignity proper to the human person, since he stands above all things, and his rights and duties are universal and inviolable",¹⁷ still one must lament the fact that myriads of injustices plague the society worldwide. Among these are injustices against migrants and refugees, persecutions based on racial, ethnic, tribal and religious differences, denial of fundamental human rights, and numerous instances of torture and wanton murder and destruction, to name only a few.¹⁸

The Catholic Bishops of Africa add to this inglorious list

... all that which constitutes a violation of human integrity, such as mutilations, physical or moral torture, psychological coercion;

*everything that offends human dignity such as subhuman conditions of life, arbitrary imprisonments, deportations and degrading working conditions. (Vatican II "Gaudium et Spes", No. 27, 1—3).*¹⁹

The Bishops are not done yet. Their statement continues:

We condemn all the crimes committed in the name of the "security of the state", as if the state were absolute and not at the service of the citizen, that is to say, the human person (Vatican II, "Gaudium et Spes", 76/1—2).

*We condemn the political system based on falsehood as well as intolerance, the system of informers, political murders, all forms of violence, corruption and the shameless enrichment of a small class at the expense of broad masses.*²⁰

Anyone who is familiar with the history of Nigeria since the attainment of political independence in 1960, cannot but be struck by how much the catalogue of injustices listed in this section has been verified in this country. One is at a loss to find a single member of that catalogue that has not afflicted this nation at one time or another since 1960. What is most disturbing is that the bulk of those injustices are still very much alive and well in our midst today, making it imperative for all men and women of goodwill to rise up in indignation and concern to dethrone the hydra-headed monster of oppression and man's inhumanity to man, in order to install in its place the reign of justice, peace and love.

The International Connection

Nigeria is not an island — indeed, no nation can afford to be one today, even if it tried. The country is, thus, affected adversely by a situation of injustice prevalent on the international scene in the form, among others, of grave imbalances in wealth, in trade: in the unduly favourable pricing of manufactured goods as against the low pricing of raw materials, for instance, thus ensuring that rich nations (producers of manufactured goods) get progressively richer at the expense of poor nations (producers of raw materials). The colossal debt burden that poor nations have to bear in relation to rich ones is a monumental disgrace and crippling injustice crying to heaven for vengeance. The poor nations have never been party to fixing the world economic order. Their efforts so far to be admitted into the

decision-making process on an eventual new order have met with rebuff from the rich and powerful nations.

*Their recent de facto exclusion from discussions on world trade and also the monetary arrangements which vitally affect their destiny are an example of lack of power which is inadmissible in a just and responsible world order.*²¹

It, thus, becomes seriously doubtful whether any effort at redressing injustice in Nigeria can go very far and have any lasting effect if the country continues to be held in the strangle-hold of an unjust international socio-politico-economic order, that it can do precious little to redress.

The Church's Role²²

That the Church has a role to play in addressing the situation of injustice worldwide, and in Nigeria, in particular, is borne out by two facts. The first is the linkage between justice and the "greatest commandment" of love, that was elaborated upon earlier in this article. If the Church is ever to fulfil the supreme commandment of love left her by her Founder, she can have no other choice than to seek the overthrow of the current regimes of injustice and promote the enthronement of justice in their place.

Secondly, the Church has a role to play in bringing about the reign of justice, because its absence is a threat to peace. Peace is often understood as something negative, namely, the absence of war. As a matter of fact, going by the Biblical references to it in the Old and the New testaments (e.g. Ez. 34: 25—30; 37: 26—28; Is. 9:5-6; - 11:1—9; 32:15—20; 53:5; Hos. 2:20—25; Zech. 8:16; 9:9—10; Mic. 5:4; Mt. 5:9; 10:12f; Jn 14:27; 20:20—21, 26; Eph. 2:14—17; Col. 1:20; Gal. 5:22; Rom 16:20; I Thess 5:23), peace should be better understood as something positive — the sphere of human life"; or else, "the good estate of all things, which God wills", or simply "salvation (which is at once a work of God and a work that God enables men to do)".²³

It was this understanding of the meaning of peace that the great Martin Luther King, Jr., had in mind, when he said: "Peace is not merely the absence of tension; it is the presence of justice"²⁴

The classical writers of the ancient Roman civilization invented a curious slogan: *Si vis pacem, para bellum* ("if you want peace, prepare for war"). Such a slogan in our time would be the perfect prescription for our

civilization to commit collective suicide. A more appropriate slogan—even an imperative one — today would be: *Si vis pacem, para justitiam* ("If you want peace, work for justice").

Therefore, because of the threat to peace—even the very absence of peace — which the prevalent situation of injustice in Nigeria spells, the Church is obliged to work for the establishment and promotion of justice in our land.

If one were to characterize the role of the Church in this regard, one would say simply that it is and ought to be a *prophetic role*. Such a role is understood to be one of "giving witness before the world of the need for love and justice".²⁵

Cynics are often hitting at the Church that she has done nothing to promote the cause of justice, and that, in fact, she has been party to the exploitation of the poor in Nigeria, in company, first, with the colonisers, later, with their neo-capitalist successors, both civilian and military.

Such an accusation is not altogether fair on the Church. It overlooks, among other things, the fact that the Church was in the forefront of the pioneering efforts to emancipate the poor in Nigeria through her educational programmes, for instance. It is a well known fact that when the colonial powers were the least inclined to establish schools to educate the local people, the Church did precisely that. It was this education that paved the way to the ultimate political emancipation of Nigeria as an independent sovereign state.

But the said accusation is not without some merit. For, after the pioneering days just mentioned, the Church does not appear to have done much more collectively in defence and on behalf of the down-and-out. This is without prejudice to the crusading efforts of certain individual members of the hierarchy, who have stood up in stout defense of a variety of human rights, no matter what kind of government was in office, whether civilian or military. For instance, in Nigeria today, the Catholic Archbishop of Lagos, Anthony Olubunmi Okogie, with his deceptively unprepossessing appearance, has assumed a stature that is larger than life because of his preparedness to stand up to any government whenever the rights of the Church or the ordinary citizen have been threatened. Also worth mentioning is the heart-warming event in 1984, at the height of the draconian rule of the Buhari-Idigbon pair, when, in the full glare of television lights, a group of Bishops, representing the Catholic Bishops Conference of Nigeria, told the government, to its own face, to desist from further infringement of the fundamental human rights of Nigerians.

Again the efforts of certain groups within the Church have been quite remarkable, like the ones running educational and rehabilitation programmes for the handicapped, social and self-help programmes for the poor and destitute, and awareness/leadership courses for various segments of the community.

All these notwithstanding, it still cannot be said with full conviction that the Church, as Church, has always identified with the oppressed and sought to bring about justice in their behalf.

“Physician, heal thyself!”

It goes without saying that if the Church is to bear prophetic witness where justice is concerned, the place to begin is within her own ranks. It has to be admitted, with regret, that the Church in Nigeria falls short of being a perfect example of justice. One does not know where to begin to list the injustices that the Church has been roundly accused of. Any catalogue of them would be too boring to contain within an article.

The view is widely held, for instance, — not without reason — that when appointments or promotions have had to be made, unseemly assaults on justice have been quite rampant. Where candidates were meant to be elected they have been *selected*; where they were supposed to be appointed, questionable criteria have been applied. Merit has been the major casualty.

Calumnies, detractions, barefaced lies have been freely used to discredit real or imagined rivals for ecclesiastical office. It would appear that when certain people imagine themselves to be in a race for an office, any means is permissible, so long as one gets the job, and one's “rival” does not. All of which has amounted to a grave breach of justice within the Church herself.

Can it be seriously argued that employees of the Church — clerical, religious or lay — have always been paid “living wages” or, at least, just and equitable wages, commensurate with the nature and demands of their jobs?

One hardly needs to mention structural injustices, which concentrate powers in the hands of a few, powers that they can wield to the detriment of their subordinates.

Where relations between various Christians denominations are concerned, justice has often counted for very little whenever privileges were at stake. Rival groups have employed glaringly unjust tactics to edge out one another in areas like land acquisition, appointments to government sponsored boards, committees, etc., scholarship awards, government grants-in-aid, and the like. Here again, the catalogue of injustices could run into several paragraphs.

The point becomes inescapable that if the Church is ever going to be able to speak out convincingly against injustice in Nigeria, she must first put down and out the injustices within her ranks. It is an uphill task, one that must be doomed to failure *ab initio*, to attempt to bear witness to what one does not practice. One could then easily be told what a Chinese proverb aptly says:

“What you are speaking so loud, I cannot hear what you say”.

These facts have not been lost on the Church. Again, if one may take the statement made by an official Church organ on the subject as an example, the 1971 Synod of Catholic Bishops said:

*While the Church is bound to give witness to justice, she recognizes that anyone who ventures to speak to people about justice must first be just in their eyes... within the Church rights must be preserved. No one should be deprived of his ordinary rights because he is associated with the Church in one way or another. Those who serve the Church by their labour, including priests and religious, should receive a sufficient livelihood and enjoy social security which is customary in their region. Lay people should be given fair wages and a system of promotion...*²⁶

This and other similar statements of the Church cannot be faulted in any way. It so happens, however, that people nowadays prefer to see sermons rather than just hear them. They would rather see the Church doing something concretely in the cause of promoting justice in Nigeria and elsewhere than referring them to “holy books” where the official position is enshrined (note the word “enshrined”). An old Latin adage maintains that *Exempla sunt validiora quam verba*. (“Examples are more valid (i.e. more convincing) than words”).

Once the Church in Nigeria is seen to have committed herself seriously to doing what needs to be done about the injustices within her ranks, then she can venture to bear prophetic witness with a view to redressing injustice in the nation at large.

Action for Justice

One course of action that readily suggests itself is in the area of education for justice. There is widespread ignorance of the issues that are involved among both the victims and the perpetrators of injustice. Oftentimes, the

oppressed have come to accept their lot as precisely that — something that was pre-ordained for them by God, and that they can do nothing about. For their education, one could employ the method of “conscientization” pioneered by the Brazilian educationist, Paulo Freire.²⁷

The privileged, too, need education on what exactly the plight of the oppressed is. More often than not, they do not really know, and so the injustices that they sometimes help to perpetrate are involuntary.

On a more concrete plane, one could propose that the Church in Nigeria pay serious attention to adult and vocational education. One is aware of and inclined to support the growing demand in some circles that the schools that were “taken over” by the government in the 1970s be returned to the Church. (The “take over” was itself, undoubtedly, an act of grave injustice on the part of the government). Even if the said demand is not met, the Church should still be allowed greater say and involvement in the schools already taken over. At the same time, she should direct a great deal more of her energy and resources towards establishing and developing programmes of adult and vocational education. These will go a long way to help the cause of justice in Nigeria.

° The changes that are called for are, however, far more structural than merely cosmetic. It is the system itself — the socio-political system — which engenders and nourishes injustice in Nigeria. That system would have to be overhauled, overturned in fact. What is called for is a veritable socio-political revolution. One needs not recoil at the word revolution. Revolutions are not always necessarily violent or bloody.

The system Nigeria inherited at independence was radically and incurably unjust. It is the liberal capitalist system. It is a system, which, by its very nature, concentrates excessive power and wealth in the hands of a few, while dispossessing the vast majority of the population. Perhaps, through education again — that is, political education this time — the Church could help to expose the evils that are inherent in the liberal capitalist system, and the need for it to be overhauled.

Paying the Cost

Crusaders for justice in every age have had to pay dearly for their efforts, sometimes with their lives. Socrates, countless Christian martyrs, and, in our own time, the Mahatma Gandhi in India, Martin Luther King, Jnr. in the United States of America, Archbishop Oscar Romero in El Salvador paid with their very lives. One would have been reluctant to add the name of Jesus Christ himself to this list if one were not encouraged by the following statement of Vatican II:

*He (Jesus) taught us by example that we, too, must shoulder that cross which the world and the flesh inflict upon those who search after peace and justice.*²⁸

Modern-day crusaders for justice must come to terms with the fact that they might have to pay dearly for their actions, and decide whether they are sufficiently equipped and willing to pay that price or not.

To begin with, whatever projects and programmes they embark on will cost money. They have to find it — from the rich no doubt. They owe it to the poor. Most of it has been stolen from them in any case.

But the cost one is more concerned with here is not money. It is rather the physical and psychological cost. A great deal of physical energy will have to be expended, travelling, teaching, tearing down, building up, and so on. If the Church pushes her crusading too far, she is bound to be stoutly resisted by the rich and mighty. Initially, even the poor themselves might resist her, because her efforts could push their oppressors to bear down more heavily on them, as happened in Egypt, during the early days of Moses’ crusading for Hebrew rights. At that time, the leaders of the sons of Israel had particularly bitter words to say to Moses and Aaron:

May Yahweh see your work and punish you as you deserve... You have made us hated by Pharaoh and his court; you have put a sword into their hand to kill us (Ex. 5:21).

The Church cannot expect to fare any better than Moses and Aaron — at least initially — in her efforts to bring about a just social order in Nigeria.

Conclusion

In conclusion, one might well recall what was said earlier on about the relationship of justice to love. It was said then that love is the basis of true, authentic justice, and that justice cannot be had in the absence of love. Any attempt, therefore, to prosecute the cause of justice without love — especially towards the perpetrators of injustice — could easily degenerate into vengeful sadism and a reversal of roles between oppressed and oppressors, the enthronement of one injustice in place of another. If it is possible to love the sinner while hating his sin, it should be possible also to love the oppressor while seeking to overturn the unjust system that he represents. That is one reason why education of the privileged, and not only of the suffering masses, has been advocated in this article as one of the means to put down injustice in the Nigerian society.

One may now conclude with one last reference to God, who is himself the Source and Guarantor of all justice.

*Justice among men will become a genuinely Christian virtue only if it is an extension of that grateful justice (= righteousness) that is owed to God.*²⁹

Notes and References

1. *Sacramentum Mundi: An Encyclopedia of Theology*, 1967, s.v. 'Justice' by Jose-Maria Diez-Alegria.
2. *Ibidem*.
3. St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, IIa IIae, q. 58, a.1. See *New Catholic Encyclopedia*, 1967, s.v. 'Justice' by Bernard Häring; *Sacramentum Mundi*, etc., loc. cit.; Joseph Omoregbe, *Ethics* (London: Global Educational Services, 1979), p. 76.
4. *Sacramentum Mundi*, etc., loc. cit.
5. John Macquarrie, 'Justice' in *A Dictionary of Ethics*, John Macquarrie, ed. (London: S.C.M. Press, 1967), p. 183.
6. *Sacramentum Mundi*, etc. loc. cit.
7. Second General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops, *The Ministerial priesthood and Justice in the World* (Washington D.C.: United States Catholic Conference), p. 42.
8. *New Catholic Encyclopedia* loc. cit.
9. *Ibidem*.
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11. Anthony P. Castle, ed., *Quotes and Anecdotes* (Leigh-on-Sea: Kevin Mayhew Publishers, 1979), p. 233.
12. Symposium of Episcopal Conferences of Africa and Madagascar (SECAM), *Catholic Bishops of Africa Speak: Family Life, Justice and Peace* (Onitsha: Tabansi press, 1978), pp. 13—15.
13. Vatican Council II, 'Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World' (*Gaudium et Spes*), 26.
14. Pius XII, cited in Anthony P. Castle, ed., op. cit., 233f.
15. St. Ambrose, *De Nabuthe*, c. 12, n. 53 (PL 14, 747).
16. Paul VI, Encyclical Letter 'On the Development of Peoples' (*Populorum Progressio*) (Vatican City: Polyglot Press., 1967) p. 23. See also Vatican II, op. cit., 69.

17. *Ibidem*, 26
18. Second General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops, op. cit., pp. 38f.
19. SECAM, op. cit., p. 17
20. *Ibidem*, pp. 18f.
21. Second General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops, op. cit., p. 50.
22. The term 'Church' is used in this article to refer to the Catholic Church, since it is the one that the author belongs to and is most familiar with. What is said of the Catholic Church may, however, in some respects, be found to be true of some or most of the other Christian denominations that are found in Nigeria. Also, the term 'Church' is used here inclusively to refer not only to the hierarchy or clergy, but also to groups and institutions of religious and laity within the Church.
23. *Sacramentum Mundi*, etc., s.v. 'Peace' by Julio Terran-Dutari.
24. *Martin Luther King, Jr., The Words of*, Selected by Coretta Scott King (London: Collins Fount Paperback, 1985), p. 83.
25. Second General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops, op. cit. p. 42.
26. *Ibidem*, p. 44.
27. Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (London: Sheed and Ward, 1972), *Passim*.
28. Vatican II, op. cit., 38.
29. *New Catholic Encyclopedia*, loc. cit.

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